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READING *NG KIM CHEW*:

MALAYSIAN-CHINESENESS AND MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN CHINESE LITERATURE IN TAIWAN

RESEARCH PAPER BY

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ABSTRACT

The idea of Chineseness as a geographic, cultural-specific and ethnically-charged concept, and the pivotal role assumed by memory linger throughout the writings of most authors hailing from Chinese community in Southeast Asia. Among these communities, being the Malaysian Chinese the more prolific in terms of number of writers and pieces of literature produced, this paper deals specifically with it. Its focus is put on the literature produced by Malaysian Chinese authors residing in Taiwan, which topic constitutes an important part of the first chapter, and on one of its main representatives, Ng Kim Chew, to whom chapter two and three are fully dedicated. A literary analysis of one of his short stories, *Huo yu tu*, will allow the reader to have a first-hand experience, through excerpts from the original text, of the importance of Chineseness and memory in the literary production of Ng and of many authors sharing with him similar life and literary experiences. I started this research from the assumption that these authors make large use of their own memories and memories from their own community in their writing as a way to re-tie themselves to the Chineseness they left in their places of origin. However in the case of Ng Kim Chew, the analysis of his works led be to theorizing that the identity he is imbued with, if there is one, is not Chinese, nor Malaysian, but purely and distinctively Malaysian-Chinese. This paper can also serve as an introduction for the general public to the field of Sinophone literature from Southeast Asia and to promote wider and innovative paths of research within the realm of Chinese studies that go beyond China proper.

Key Words: Malaysian Chinese Literature in Taiwan, Ng Kim Chew, Literary Analysis, Malaysian Chinese, Memory

Note: Chinese words and expressions are given in characters and *pinyin*, without tones, when they appear for the first time in the text. For proper names, the most common English orthography is used. For ethnic Chinese people mentioned in the paper, their English names or an official/preferred spelling of their names is used, when one is available. For all the others, romanization is carried out according to the *pinyin* system.

This paper was written following the spelling rules of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* and the suggestions of *The Canadian Press Stylebook*.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Study: Object, Aim and Rationale

The main purpose of this study* is to explore the themes and analyze the linguistic features of "Huo yu tu" (火與土),[1] a short story by Malaysian-born Sinophone writer[2] Ng Kim Chew (黃錦樹). The story was first published in the November 2004 issue of the Taiwanese literary magazine "United Literature" (聯合文學), and appeared in the arts section of the Malaysian newspaper "Sinchow Daily" (星洲日報- 文藝春秋) one month later. Central to the entire fictional production of Ng Kim Chew, and to this short story in particular, are the themes of *Chineseness* (or *Malaysian-Chineseness* as it seems more appropriate to define it, in my opinion, which will be clarified later in the paper) and memory. I tried to convey the importance of these two aspects of Ng's storytelling starting from the title of this paper.

Due to time constraints and limitations in the allowed length of this final paper, the original object of study (Contemporary Malaysian Chinese Literature in Taiwan),[3] which I plan to develop at a later stage of my postgraduate studies, was narrowed down to one specific work within the body of literature of one single author.

* This research has been carried out thanks to a pre-doctoral Grant for Research Personnel in Training (Beques Predoctorals de Formació de Personal Investigador - FPI) offered by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB).

[1] This story has not been translated into English, nor into any other language yet, so I prefer to leave the title, which could be rendered as "Fire and Soil", in its original form.

[2] A Sinophone writer is someone who uses the Chinese language, either natively or by adoption, as his main language of expression, independently from his place of birth or residence. The concept of Sinophone is borrowed from Prof. Shu-mei Shih.

[3] The expression translates three very similar Chinese expressions, namely: 當代留臺馬華文學 (*dangdai liu Tai Mahua wenxue*), 當代旅臺馬華文學 (*dangdai lü Tai Mahua wenxue*), 當代在臺馬華文學 (*dangdai zai Tai Mahua wenxue*), the third character of each Chinese phrase above (留, 旅, 在) meaning "to stay, to be somewhere". In Chinese language articles and research works on the topic, each author uses one of the three expressions without, however, giving any reason for his choice. Nevertheless, from the reading material I consulted, it appears that such choice is always consistent and in each piece of writing appears one and only one of the above Chinese phrases.

At this point, it is necessary to explain why I chose Malaysian Chinese literature[4] in Taiwan as my main research area, and why when it came to focalizing on a fictional work in particular, I opted for Ng's "Huo yu tu".

I developed an interest in Contemporary Malaysian Chinese literature, after reading a few short stories and novels, which appeared regularly on Taiwanese literary magazines and literary supplements to Mandarin language newspapers from Taiwan. When I started to search for more in-depth information about Malaysian sinophone writers, I discovered that many of them, such as Li Yongping (李永平) and Chang Kuei-hsin (張貴興) just to name a few, were awarded important literary prizes on the island, in their native Malaysia and within other overseas Chinese communities. Among these writers, those residing in Taiwan seemed to be more blended in the sinophone literary establishment, with their works having wider circulation within the international Chinese-language community.[5] However, interestingly enough, the number of scholarly articles and literary criticism dealing with this very geographic-specific sector of Sinophone literature was, and still is, very slender when compared with the position it occupies within the Chinese-language literary system. Thus, this paper aims at filling this gap and introducing the readership, within and outside the academic realm, to a group of writers born on a lively and fertile soil for Sinophone literature.

Ng Kim Chew is only one of the many Malaysian-born writers currently calling Taiwan home. I decided to focus my research paper on him, because he embodies the literary characteristics of the majority of these authors, which will be discussed in a later section of this work, and also because his popularity and his activity as a university

[4] The question of what kind of literature falls within the realm of Malaysian Chinese literature or even on a more general level, what is Malaysian Chinese literature, is discussed in detail by Kien Ket Lim (林建國) in a paper titled "Why Malaysian Chinese Literature?" (爲什麼馬華文學？ *Weishenme mahua wenxue?*) and first published in 1991, which also appeared in Chen, Dawei et al., *Mahua wenxue duben II: chidao huisheng*. Taipei: Wanjuanlou Tushu Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 2004.The two most commonly heard definition of Malaysian Chinese literature come from Malaysian Chinese scholars themselves and from Chinese scholars of literature. The first agree on the fact that it should be seen primarily as a geographic definition and thus as a branch, in the Chinese language, of the literature of Malaysia. The latter stress the linguistic component and consider it as a subdivision of the wider category of Chinese literature. Their explanation is fairly straightforward: Malaysian Chinese authors write in Chinese and thus show a great amount of interconnection with the culture of their country of origin. Whether and to what extent these authour consider China as their country of origin is, however, very questionable and there is no single answer to the inquiry.

[5] By international Chinese-language community, I mean the Greater China Region (P.R.C., Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau) and those regions and countries with a well-established ethnic Chinese population, still capable of communicating in one of the Chinese dialects, such as South East Asia, the USA, Canada and Australia.

professor and literary critic make him one of the spokespersons of Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan.

The choice of "Huo yu tu" as the central focus of the literary analysis within this work is more practical in nature, but was by no means made randomly. The non-excessive length of the story (twenty-two pages in its paperback edition, which is the one I used as reference)[6] suits the scope and the required overall structure of this paper very well, while the wealth of themes and linguistic features makes it a perfect example of Contemporary Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan. The location where the events take place is also quite exemplary. In fact, in most fictional works by this group of writers it is not uncommon for the action to develop against the backdrop of a tropical landscape, be it in peninsular Malaysia, be it on the northern part of the island of Borneo, belonging today to the Malaysian state of Sarawak.

This study is thus intended as an introduction to the situation of Malaysian Chinese Literature in Taiwan, through the literary analysis of a specific and very representative short story, taken here as a "case study". The present paper joins a very slim number of publications and dissertations on similar aspects of Malaysian Sinophone literature written in the English language, the most recent and complete of which is probably Allison Groppe's PhD dissertation titled *Not Made in China: Inventing Local Identities in Contemporary Malaysian Chinese fiction* and presented at Harvard University in 2006. Research on the topic of Malaysian Chinese Literature is being carried out in Malaysian and Singaporean academic institutions and, on a minor scale, in Chinese and Taiwanese university and research institutes. On the other hand, there are very few scholars in Malaysia that focus their research activities on the literary production of Malaysian-born writers who are now Taiwan residents, considered by many Malaysian Chinese academicians as not belonging to the Malaysian Chinese literary system, since they left the Federation and found themselves, voluntarily or not, within the Taiwanese publishing world. This last group of writers is, however, becoming the object of an increasing number of studies from academicians and postgraduate students (mostly Malaysian-born ethnic Chinese) attached to universities and other research institutions in Taiwan, which are the main critical apparatus I used to write this paper.

[6] Ng, Kim Chew, *Tu yu huo – Tanah Melayu*. Taipei: Cité Press, 2005.

The present study, despite its brevity and limitations, by dealing with Ng Kim Chew, is meant to do justice to a very dynamic and creative, but too often neglected part of Sinophone literature.

Apart from situating itself in the wide realm of literary criticism, the paper, due to its object of study, also touches upon two other areas of research, namely Southeast Asian studies and Chinese Diaspora studies. The general interest in overseas Chinese is steadily on the rise, and the increasing number of publications dealing with the topic proves it. Nevertheless, the research carried out in Europe lately tends to focus on the diasporic phenomenon within European boundaries, neglecting that the bulk of the Chinese Diaspora is located in Southeast Asia, a region hosting more than seventy-five percent of the ethnic Chinese population residing outside the greater China region.[7]

Research-wise, Southeast Asia is also an area with a great potential still not fully understood here in Europe. Research in the broad field of Southeast Asian studies and within the more restricted field of the Chinese diasporas in the region is scarce or close to non-existent in the Iberian peninsula. This is striking enough, especially if we consider the historical links between parts of the region (the Philippines, a country that also hosts a large ethnic Chinese community) and the kingdom of Spain.

It holds even truer for the field of literary studies. As a matter of fact, research work on Southeast Asian literary traditions, and by this I mean not only those traditions in the official languages of the region, but also in the languages of the linguistic minorities, such as in the case of the ethnic Chinese writers from the area, is sparse and discontinuous in European academic institutions.[8]

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[7] Statistics regarding the overseas Chinese population are available on the website of the Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission, R.O.C. (Taiwan) (中華民國－臺灣－僑務委員會): http://www.ocac.gov.tw/index.asp [accessed on 2008-04-10] Statistics from governments in Southeast Asia are more difficult to obtain, as most of them do not record the number of their population of Chinese descent. Also, many ethnic Chinese who were born and raised in Southeast Asia do not refer to themselves as Chinese anymore and admit only to having some Chinese blood. Due to this situation, every figure on the overseas Chinese population in the region is inevitably rather inexact

[8] Notable exceptions are the French INALCO (Institut National de Langues et Civilisations Orientales) and the University of Paris VII, where research in the field of Vietnamese literature are being carried out, the London-based, University of London-affiliated SOAS (School of Asian and African Studies), with its department of Southeast Asia, and the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, where there are some researchers working on Malay and Indonesian literature.
Another exception can be seen in the attention devoted, this time more by the general public than by academicians, to a few authors of from Southeast Asia that express themselves in the English language. Examples of this type of writers are Singaporean Hwee Hwee Tan, Malaysian-born, Australia-educated Hsu-ming Teo, Malaysian Tan Twan Eng, the highly praised author of the novel *The Gift of Rain*, and Taiwan-born, Malaysia-raised Tash Aw, whose novel *The Silk Factory* was longlisted for the prestigious Man Booker

This work, by more or less directly touching upon these two fields of studies, is also intended as a showcase of possible unexplored research paths that academicians and students in Spanish institutions can open with success.

2. Research Question and Working Hypothesis

The diasporic situation of Ng Kim Chew is rather complex, since he is an ethnic Chinese person of Fujian origin, born and raised in Malaysia, but now a permanent resident of Taiwan. Thus the question central to this research, to which we try to give an exhaustive answer is the following: what role do the idea of Chineseness and memory play in Ng's short story "Huo yu tu"? It is bearing this interrogative in mind that the textual analysis is carried out. A similar question will be used at a later stage, in a wider research project, where I will aim at finding a connection between Malaysian-born Sinophone writers residing in Taiwan and the use of memory on various levels (personal, communal, ethnic and societal) and the idea of Chineseness within their literary production.

The preliminary hypothesis is that the sense of belonging to a homogeneous and closed community based on ethnic features, which in the case of "Huo yu tu" translates in Chineseness, and his own childhood memories blended with collective memories constitute the very core of the story. I propose this hypothesis as the starting point of the literary analysis implemented in this paper.

Closely related to both the question and the hypothetical answer to it is an apparent contradiction that I try to solve: the idea of Chineseness is undoubtedly linked to a specific geographic region corresponding to the Chinese mainland, a fatherland, an ancestral home to the majority of overseas Chinese. However, the personal memories recalled by Ng in the story I analyze, but also in most of the others, are connected to physical and emotional sensations taking place in an environment unrelated to China: the rubber forest of southern peninsular Malaysia, the birthplace of the writer. Thus, in Ng's production, we can find different and contradictory spatial settings, one constructed – ancestral China, one remembered, and physically re-experienced and rediscovered in the case of "Huo yu tu" – native Malaysia. To these we must add the place where the creative process takes place:

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prize in 2005 and won, in the same year, the Whitbread Book Awards First Novel Award as well as the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel in the Asia-Pacific region.

Taiwan. This wealth of locations constitutes an interesting departure point from which to analyze the story, its themes and its linguistic peculiarities.

3. Methodology, Sources and Structure

As already pointed out in the previous sections of this introductory chapter, the very core of this study is the short story "Huo yu tu" as literary product and as a means of approaching its author and his peculiarities as a writer in the first place, and secondly the group of Malaysian-born Taiwan-resident sinophone authors. Thus, the main working method used in this project is the literary analysis of a Chinese language text. Analysing any kind of text requires not only focusing on the written word itself, but also drawing from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in this interpretative situation. This is also true for texts literary in nature.

A rather new and innovative idea within the field of Chinese studies constitutes the methodological support of this paper. My focus is not China proper, but the contemporary Chinese-speaking world, seen as a new and complex object of study, not only at the national level, but also at the regional and global level.

Moreover, in recent years, research on various aspects of the Chinese Diaspora righteously entered the field of Chinese studies, thanks to the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Shih Shu-mei, who reformulates what we call Chinese studies as Sinophone studies,[9] i.e. the study of cultures and societies expressing themselves in a Sinitic language, regardless of their geographical location. Another scholar, David Der-Wei Wang is especially active in re-theorizing Chinese (literary) studies by taking into consideration the role of globalization and transnationalism, which transform the concept of Chinese literature as a national literature. The main aim of these scholars, generally belonging to the Chinese Diaspora themselves, is to expand the idea of "Chineseness" and to create awareness on this topic unfairly neglected by people who conduct research in Chinese studies.

The most evident feature of Ng's "Huo yu tu" and of the vast majority of his fictional works is the role of the act of writing as a "commemorative ceremony", an act

[9] Shih, Shu-mei. *Visuality and Identity. Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2007

which aims at passing on the memory of what we could call "the South seas" or the "rubber forest", i.e. that part of South East Asia where Ng grew up. Due to the peculiar personal experience of Ng, it is almost impossible to develop a study on his literary achievements without also analysing memory and identity within the community he hails from, that of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. Useful to the better understanding of those external factors indispensable to the analysis of the story were two recent and outstanding works dealing with these two aspects of the Malaysian Chinese community, one by Sharon Carstens[10] and the other by Jean Elizabeth DeBernardi.[11]

Carstens' work is a collection of the writer's articles published between 1983 and 2003, in which she analyzes in a very articulate and cogent manner issues related to the nature of Malaysian Chinese identity as being multiple, provisional and situational, due to the daily exchanges with other ethnic groups and to the migration movements leading them outside the Federation of Malaysia.

Despite not being directly connected to the theme of this paper, DeBernardi's book was a helpful reading, which helped me gain a better understanding of how ethnic Chinese have organized their social life in multicultural Malaysia, first as immigrants and later on as one of the ethnic groups in the newly born Federation.

Methodology-wise, great help and valuable guiding directions were found in an article written by James St. André, who also analyses some literary texts from South East Asia's sinophone writers in order to discuss themes of memory and identity.[12]

The most important sources for this paper are the primary ones, i.e. apart from "Huo yu tu" itself, all the other fiction and non-fiction works by Ng Kim Chew, which helped me truly enter the author's realm and gain a thorough knowledge of his recurring themes, linguistic features and position within the Sinophone literary world.

The vast majority of the readings that lead to the production of this research project are in the Chinese language, thus showing once again the wide gap between the study of Malaysian Chinese Literature in Taiwan itself and in the West. Of great value has been the

[10] Carstens, Sharon A. *Histories, Cultures, Identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005.
[11] DeBernardi, Jean Elizabeth. *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
[12] St. André, James. "'You Can Never Go Home Again':Cultural Memory and Identity Formation in the Writing of Southeast Asian Chinese." Journal of Chinese Overseas 2,1 (May 2006), 33-55.

extensive work carried out through the years by Prof. Zhang Jinzhong (張錦忠), or Tee Kim Tong, according to the Hokkien/Teochow transliteration of his name, which he uses in an international environment. A Malaysian Chinese, who has been residing in Taiwan for many years, Professor Zhang's scholarly production focuses on Malaysian Chinese literature written both within and outside the borders of the Malaysian Federation and has provided me with an immense wealth of information, not only on the specific topic of this paper, but also on Sinophone literature in Southeast Asia in general, including minor literatures such as Bruneian Chinese Literature or on the various subdivisions of Malaysian Chinese Literature, such as Sarawak Chinese Literature, Sabah Chinese Literature and Peninsular Malaysian Chinese Literature.

However, for convenience's sake and due to the fact that this differentiation is not currently in use and especially when dealing with contemporary authors, we decided to group them under the broader realm of Malaysian Chinese Literature.

In order to give the reader a complete and exhaustive understanding of the main focus of this study and in order to adhere to the formal guidelines for the writing of this research project, I decided to structure the paper into six chapters, including this introductory section.

The second and following chapter is dedicated to the history and present situation of the Malaysian sinophone writers in Taiwan. It will start by introducing the reader to the social and historical environment of Malaysia in which Ng, and other writers of Chinese descent, grew up and studied until he decided to move to Taipei. The conditions that caused these authors to leave their native Malaysia and opt for Taiwan will be analysed in this section, which will also help in the contextualization of Ng's production and in the positioning of his works in the wider literary system.

I devoted the third section to a presentation of Ng Kim Chew, his life and works, both as a novelist and as a literary critic, and his position in the various sinophone literary systems (the overseas Chinese one, the Taiwanese and the Malaysian Chinese). The recurring themes in Ng's production are also discussed here.

The fourth chapter, which I consider the core of this paper, consists of the analysis of "Huo yu tu". After a presentation of the collection of short stories in which it was published and a short summary of the short story itself, I examine the language used and

the most relevant themes, such as childhood and memory, the relationship with China – the ancestral home – and Chineseness, and the relationship with "the other".

I dedicated section five of this paper to the concluding remarks on the results of the analysis carried out in the previous chapters. While in previous parts of this introduction, I attracted the reader's attention to the poorly researched problem of Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese writers, in the concluding chapter I aimed at stressing the importance of a further development of this study.

The paper is followed by a list of bibliographical references relevant to this work. Only the ones actually read and used to produce the paper are listed.

II. MALAYSIA, TAIWAN AND MALYSIAN CHINESE WRITERS

1. Malaysia in the XX century: its social and cultural environment

Malaysia, independent from British rule since August, 31, 1957, is home to more than 27 million inhabitants,[13] among which we find a sizeable Chinese population, together with the Malay majority, a Tamil-speaking Indian minority and other people of Austronesian origin (Iban, Kadazan-Dusun, and Bajau). [14]

In modern times, the first attempt of a unified and self-governing Malaysia can be traced back to the fourth decade of last century. In fact, the Malayan Union was established in 1946 and it was constituted by all the British possessions in Malaya (today known as Peninsular Malaysia) with the exception of Singapore. Two years after its formation it was dissolved and replaced by the Federation of Malaya, which went even further in the process of self-governance by restoring the autonomy of the rulers of the Malay states under British protection.

Malaysia, as the sovereign State we know today, came into being in 1963, when Malaya and the British colonies of Sabah, Sarawak (both on the northern side of the island of Borneo) and Singapore united into the Malaysian Federation.[15]

Chinese immigrants began to reach peninsular Malaysia and the areas of northern Borneo from the areas of Fujian (福建) and Guangdong (廣東) in the nineteenth century, but the economic Depression of the 1930s, and the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese

[13] The figure refers to 13 July 2007. This and other data concerning Malaysian population are available for general consultation on the Department of Statistics Malaysia website at: www.statistics.gov.my [accessed on 2008-05-09].

[14] According to the Census 2000, the ethnic composition of the Malaysian population was: Malays and other Austronesian people (collectively known as Bumiputra) 65.1%, Chinese 26.0% and Indians 7.7%. Data from the Department Statistics Malaysia: http://www.statistics.gov.my/english/frameset_census.php?file=census [accessed on 2008-05-09].

[15] Initially, the Sultanate of Brunei also expressed interest in joining the Federation, but then withdrew from the plan, as also reported in a Time Magazine article from September, 20, 1963 available at: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,940146-2,00.html [accessed on 2008-05-09]. Moreover, Singapore left the Federation two year after its formation and established an independent Republic on August, 9, 1965, thus becoming the only country in the region where overseas Chinese constitute the majority of the population, and the only territory outside the Greater China region where Mandarin Chinese is an official language.

war in 1937, had the effect of ending the migratory flow. This stabilised the demographic situation and it also ended the prospect of the Malays becoming a minority.

Nevertheless, this didn't stop the country's fall into a state of racial division, which eventually led to serious tension between the Malays and the Chinese, with the Indians eventually and gradually getting involved, and culminated in the riots of 1969. This unfortunate racial incident began on May 13 in Kuala Lumpur, the federal capital and a state of nationwide curfew was declared three days after, despite the riots igniting only the capital territory and the surrounding state of Selangor.[16]

The discontent among the Malay population was mainly the consequence of what they saw as a clear Chinese advantage in education, which played a great role in maintaining their control of the economy. The education issue had already been addressed some years before, and with new regulations in school curricula, it was clear that the Federation was heading toward the predominance of Malay people in every sphere of the country's life. In fact, Malay was recognized as the sole official language of the country and the only teaching language in state-run primary schools, to which English was added as a second teaching language in secondary schools. Moreover, the entrance exam to the University of Malaya, which had been relocated to Kuala Lumpur from Singapore, was to be conducted in Malay.

The Chinese and Indian communities were allowed to maintain their own Chinese and Tamil primary schools, although these institutions had to conform to the new "Malaysian curriculum" set by the Malay-dominated government and the Malay language became a compulsory subject.

This shift in the ethnic power balance was greatly accentuated and institutionalized by the New Economic Policy (NEP), a controversial programme launched two years after the Kuala Lumpur riots by then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. The aim of this policy was to end the socioeconomic inequities between the Chinese and the Malays, through a series of reforms seen by the former as a means to cement the idea of a Malay supremacy (*ketuanan Melayu* in Malay) and an action aiming at reducing them to citizens of a lesser level.

[16] An interesting account on the riots and the general feelings that led to them can be found in an English-language novel written by Shirley Lim, a Malaysian of Chinese descent, now living in the United States. Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin, *Joss and Gold*. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2002.

It is also in this period of great changes for Malaysia and its people that the term *Bumiputra*, literally meaning "children of the soil", from the Malay words *bumi* (son) and *putra* (soil), acquires strongly political and racial connotations. In fact, it becomes an umbrella-term defining the Malays and all the Austronesian peoples dwelling within the Federation and it indicates the target people of governmental affirmative actions.

Furthermore, the 1970s saw the birth of the idea that both Chinese and Indians had to embrace Malay culture. As a matter of fact, the cultural sphere within the Malaysian Chinese community was affected by the introduction, in 1971, of the National Cultural Policy (NCP), which limited its growth by setting the principle of what can be considered national culture. It clearly stated that Malaysian national culture had to be based on the cultures of the indigenous people of the peninsula, that Islam had an important role in its moulding and that occasionally, elements from other cultural traditions that were deemed suitable and reasonable could be accepted as part of the national culture.[17]

These actions somehow held back the development of a full-grown and independent Chinese cultural community and, from the 1970s onwards, urged many ethnic Chinese who wanted to further their studies, mainly in the humanities, to look at Taiwan as an island of possibilities, where their talent could develop and their need of knowledge could be fulfilled.

2. The literary development of the Chinese in Malaysia in the XX century

Language-wise, the literature produced by ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, and in Malaysia in particular, can be classified as belonging to three different groups.[18] The earliest writings were in the local indigenous languages and aimed at transmitting, in a

[17] The complete text of the law on the NCP can be read, in its original Malay version, at http://tinyurl.com/5ye9te [accessed on 2008-05-09].
[18] This categorization is also discussed in Wang, Gungwu. "Within and Without: Chinese Writers Overseas." Journal of Chinese Overseas 1,1 (May 2005), 1-15.

more or less faithful manner, the four great Chinese classical novels[19] to others in their community who had lost reading competence in their ethnic language. Besides, local-born *Baba* or *Pernanakan* Chinese[20] also produced an extensive literature in Malay.

The second group, which saw a few examples at the beginning of the twentieth century, but grew in importance and number in the last decades of the same century, consists of works of literature written in English, the colonial language. These writings were published mainly in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, a rather short-lived Singaporean publication (1897-1907). Lack of audience did not allow such writers to make an impact in the local literary world and their development did not go any further. In recent years, however, an increasing number of English-language educated Malaysian Chinese entered the international and thriving Anglophone literary system, with some degree of success and a faithful audience scattered globally.[21]

Works written in Chinese constitute the third group. Their birth can be traced back to the publication of the first Chinese-language newspapers toward the end of the nineteenth century. The first writers of this group were all China-educated and thus they expressed themselves mainly through the use of the classical written language (文言 *wenyan*), although more popular fiction in vernacular language (白話 *baihua*), such as stories depicting urban life in early-twentieth-century Shanghai was also published.

The first stages of Chinese-language literature in Malaysia (and throughout Southeast Asia) are closely connected to the development of literature in China. Thus, the

[19] These novels, known in Chinese as 四大名著 (*si da mingzhu*, the four great masterpieces), were 三國演義 (*San guo yanyi*, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms), 水許傳 (*Shuihuzhuan*, All Men are Brothers), 西遊記 (*Xiyouji*, Journey to the West), and 紅樓夢 (*Hongloumeng*, The Dream of the Red Mansion).

[20] Also known as Baba-Nyonya (from the Hokkien language: 峇峇娘惹 *Bā-bā Niû^{n}-liá*) and Straits Chinese (土生華人 *tusheng huaren*). These terms are used to refer to the descendents of the very early Chinese immigrants to both the British Straits Settlements of Malaya and the Dutch-controlled island of Java among other places, who have partially adopted Malay customs in an effort to be assimilated into the local communities. They used to speak a dialect of the Malay language containing many Hokkien words and known as Baba Malay (in Malay: *Bahasa Melayu Baba*), nowadays understood only by a few older member of this community. Peranakan culture is considered a disappearing culture. The birth of the Federation of Malaysia and the Republic of Singapore, resulted in the assimilation of Peranakans into mainstream Malaysian/Singaporean Chinese culture.

[21] Refer to note 7 in the previous chapter.

May Fourth Movement (五四運動)[22] produced a shift from classical Chinese to vernacular, or modern, Chinese and a change in the themes that were dealt with, also in locally produced literature. Patriotic writings, embracing China's fight against Japanese imperialistic ambitions, began to appear in the 1930s. This type of works monopolized virtually every publication until the end of World War II, making it practically impossible for "less patriotic" or less politically oriented writers to publish their writings centred on local lives or on their condition as newly arrived immigrants or long-time residents. Local writings were nothing more than a mere supplement to those written in China and had, at this stage, no distinct Malaysian Chinese characteristics or flavour, be it in themes, be it in the use of the Chinese language. But in such a politically charged environment and in the midst of such political concerns, it seemed natural that attention to any other type of writing was indeed scarce, or virtually non-existent.

The situation changed towards the end of the war, and especially thanks to the role of Chinese schools, which had been established throughout the Malaysian territory, as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Students attending these schools were now both local-born Chinese as well as those who left China as children. They were more integrated in the local society and their concerns focused more on living among non-Chinese and under foreign rule than on China affairs. This change of direction in the Malaysian Chinese community was also reflected in the works of authors hailing from the community. A wider range of issues were addressed in their writings and their stories, poetry and plays tended to depict various aspects of Malaysian Chinese society, the feelings of overseas Chinese and the difficulties of conveying their Chineseness to the local-born.

As China became less prominent in the local life of the Malaysian Chinese, the mid-twentieth century saw a growth in writings dealing with the politics and situation of the newly born Federation of Malaysia.

[22] It was an anti-imperialist political and cultural movement in early modern China. It takes its name from the date (May, 4th, 1919) when students from Peking University (北京大學 *Beijing daxue*) and other local educational institutions gathered in the Tian'anmen Square (天安門廣場) and held a demonstration against what they considered a "spineless" Chinese government. On the cultural front, the movement advocated the rejection of Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture (including the classical language) as the only means to modernize China and transform it into a country able to compete with Western countries and Japan.

Things began to change in the 1960s, as it was already discussed in the previous section of this chapter. For those who wrote in Chinese, the trend was very clear: despite many Chinese primary schools and a small number of self-funded high schools[23] still survived in the newly born Malaysian federation, stress was now put on the promotion of Malay as the sole and unifying language of the country. Chinese was relegated to the role of a second language, and the same happened with English – the former colonial language – and with Tamil, the language spoken by the Indian population. The choice of which language to use divided the community. Driven by practical needs, many parents chose to have their children educated in English, but the general result was that ethnic Chinese under this new, Malay dominated education system were left with a weak mastery of the three languages. The same weakness was reflected also in the local literary production, and this prompted some of the most determined graduates of the independent Chinese secondary schools to leave for Taiwan to pursue their studies in a sort of voluntary exile in search of a new beginning, far from their country, but also from an educational and intellectual apparatus heavily influenced by the Malay elite. On the island they had to come to terms with a different and possibly more modern kind of Chineseness, which made it all the more difficult to readapt to Malaysian society when they returned, as questions about what was their place in their home country and whether they really belonged there began to haunt them.

Chinese-language literature in Malaysia thus underwent a steady, and up to this date, still irreversible process of decline, due to the aforementioned conditions rather unfavourable to the growth of Chinese culture. This also affected the Malaysian Chinese

[23] They are also known as "Chinese Independent High Schools" (in Chinese: 華文獨立中級學校 *Huawen duli zhongji xuexiao*) and are privately owned, often community-funded secondary schools. Today only sixty of them remain throughout the country, but still constitute the main source of secondary-level education for the majority of ethnic Chinese students. After Malaysia gained independence, many of these schools (there were close to one hundred such schools in British-ruled Malaya) converted to government-funded National Type Schools, in which the government is in charge of both personnel and school curriculum. Nowadays, students of the independent schools follow a different curriculum, approved by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, and take a standardised test known as Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), different from the national *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), needed to attend Malaysian universities. Many graduates from such schools opt for furthering their education in other Chinese speaking territories in the Greater China Region (as is the case with Ng Kim Chew), or in Anglophone countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia.
Independent schools are managed by a nation-wide association called United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (in Chinese: 馬來西亞華校聯合會總會 *Malaixiya huaxiao dongshi lianhehui zonghui*), whose information is available at: www.djz.edu.my

publishing industry, as did the worsening of the writing and reading ability in their heritage language by newer generations of Chinese descent educated under the new school system. The cultural policy of Malaysia, which relegated literatures written in a language other than Malay to a subordinated level,[24] was also partly responsible for the constraints caused to the development of a thriving literary production in Chinese and for transforming it into a minor literature. This situation has not changed much to this date. In fact, as a border literature in the Malaysian literary polysystem, literature written in Chinese (or Tamil) is confined to the boundary of ethnic literature and it is not given the legitimacy to enjoy the status of national literature as Malay literature does. The position and the nature of Malaysian Chinese literature is thus clear: it is a literature produced in the country, but being written in a language other than the national language (Malay), it is not recognized by the official discourse as national literature. In other words, we could say that it is defined by the non-geographical borders of ethnicity and language. Despite being produced by Malaysian citizens, Malaysian Chinese literature is still being denied the status of national literature, remaining at the margin of the local literary system and in a subject position.

According to Professor Zhang Jinzhong, the result of such a challenging environment can also be seen in many writers of Chinese origin's closing within their own community and rejecting the interaction that flourished in colonial Malaya in the nineteenth and early twentieth century among the various ethnic groups, namely between the Malay and the people from Guangdong and Fujian areas of China.[25] These intermingling which gave birth to the *Baba* Chinese culture was to be replaced, in the last decades of the twentieth century, by a more traditional form of Chineseness, especially through the promotion of the Mandarin language within the Chinese communities of both Malaysia and Singapore[26] by the various Chinese associations, and the formation of a

[24] On the other hand, literature written in the Malay language is commonly known as *sastera kebangsaan Malaysia*, or " Malaysian national literature" and is promoted by the government through a cultural body also responsible for the correct use of the Malay language in both Malaysia and Brunei: *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (The Institute of Language and Literature). Malay intellectuals consider it to be the righteous representative of Malaysian literature, as it is native to the Malay World (*Dunia Melayu*) and thus is the only endogenous written production of the country, the Chinese-language and Tamil literatures being exogenous, i.e. imported, literary traditions.

[25] Zhang, Jinzhong. *Nanyang lunshu: Mahua wenxue yu wenhua shuxing*. Taipei: Cité Press, 2003

[26] In Singapore, the government launched an official campaign to promote the correct use of Mandarin Chinese. The campaign, known as "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (講華語運動 *Jiang huayu yundong*) was

global Chinese identity, often incompatible with the localized Chinese identity of older generations.

3. Taiwan: a new home for Malaysian Chinese literature

As previously stated, many Chinese-educated Malaysians chose to leave their native land to seek further education abroad. This choice was due, among other factors, to the introduction by the Malaysian government of the education quota system when the National Economic Policy was implemented in the early 1970s. Under the new system a much higher percentage of admissions to universities was allocated to the *bumiputra*. The ethnic Chinese applicants failing to be admitted were forced to resort to other countries. Most of them opted for Taiwan, which seemed, at the time, a good compromise between Chinese values and culture and Western-style higher education. At the same time, ethnic Chinese from the Southeast Asian region were encouraged to travel to Taiwan to further their studies by the Nationalist government's overseas Chinese educational policy, which aimed at fostering good relationship between the Republic of China and the overseas Chinese community and at forging a sense of loyalty to the Nationalist government among ethnic Chinese in the region.

These students from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries were known in Taiwan as 橋生 (*qiaosheng*) or "overseas Chinese students". The term has a very strong ethnic connotation. In fact, it suggests that they were Chinese born outside China and were residents in foreign countries. Despite being considered Chinese, these students held alien resident permits throughout their stay and were never granted citizenship, unlike what would normally happen with "returned" students from Hong Kong and Macau. The Nationalist government saw the arrival of many diasporic Chinese students as a "return to the motherland" (回歸祖國 *huigui zuguo*). For the students however, it was not the case, since none of them had their ancestral home on the island. They saw their new life in Taiwan as a rite of passage, a symbolic voyage of cultural discovery and resinization.

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first developed in 1979 by then Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew and carried forward by the "Promote Mandarin Council" (推廣華語理事會 *Tuiguang huayu lishihui*) with the main objective of encouraging Chinese Singaporeans to speak Mandarin as a common language, instead of using dialects. No such campaign has been launched in Malaysia formally. However, local Chinese associations are encouraging the learning and speaking of correct Mandarin among the younger generations of Malaysian Chinese. The Government of Singapore dedicates a website to its language campaign: http://www.mandarin.org.sg

Those with literary aspirations found on the island fertile soil to plant the seed of what would become their future career as novelists, poets or essay writers. The works by these authors were grouped, until the 1980s, in what was called 橋生文學 (*qiaosheng wenxue*) or "literature of the overseas Chinese students" regardless of the themes approached, the literary genre and any other factor.[27] A few Malaysian Chinese students had already started a literary career, or had at least approached the literary circles in their native Malaysia, while others, as is the case with Ng Kim Chew, moved the first steps in the literary arena only after settling in Taiwan as undergraduate students. In both cases, however, moving to Taiwan, or to be more precise, moving to Taipei (since the majority of them were students in colleges and university within the Taipei metropolitan area)[28] marked the beginning of their journey to artistic maturity. Although after four or five years of university studies, many of these students/writers left Taiwan either to go back to Malaysia or to further their studies in a third country, some of them chose the island as the background to their adulthood and literary career.

Starting from the last decade of the twentieth century, some Malaysian Chinese writers have become especially successful in Taiwan,[29] winning various nationwide critics' and readers' awards, managing to land publishing contacts with powerful publishers, and putting their works on the shelves of most Taiwanese bookstores and libraries.

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[27] The same works fell within the so-called 留學生文學 (*liuxuesheng wenxue*) or "literature of the students abroad", according to the Chinese literary circles in Malaysia of that time.

[28] The area is known today as the Taipei-Keelung Metropolitan Area (臺北-基隆都會區 *Taibei - Jilong duhui qu*). Its total land area is 2,457.1253 km², with a population of 6,752,826.

[29] Among these writers and apart from Ng Kim Chew, we find Chang Kuei-hsin (張貴興) an ethnic Chinese born on the island of Borneo, who moved to Taiwan to further his studies and eventually settled on the island where he divides his time between teaching English in a secondary school and writing novels set, for the most part, in his native North Borneo. Among his most successful novels, there are 我思念的長眠中的南國公主 (*Wo simian de changmian zhong de nanguo gongzhu*), published in 2001 and available in English translation under the title *My South Seas Sleeping Beauty*, 猴杯 (*Houbei*, which in English translates as "The Primate Cup"), published in Taiwan in the year 2000 and 群像(*Qun xiang*, literally "Herd of elephants"), both still unavailable in translation. Another author worth mentioning is Li Yongping (李永平), also a native of North Borneo, who began his literary career while still in Southeast Asia. He is now a well-known and respected novelist in Taiwan and his most popular work of fiction is 吉陵春秋 (*Jiling Chunqiu*), published in Taipei in 1986 and also available in an English translation titled *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles.* The book, which received much critical acclaim, is considered to be among the one hundred best Chinese-language novels. Li is also a renowned translator of Anglophone literature. Among his latest literary translations there is the highly praised Taiwanese version of Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies*.

Agreeing with Professor Zhang's idea,[30] I consider that the importance reached by these writers made evident a shift in the direction of Malaysian Chinese literature, which had been taking place since the 1960s. Until the mid-twentieth century, it was mainly a southward literature, with new ideas and literary lymph arriving from China, situated at Malaysia's north. With the new generation of Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese writers, the ideas, the themes and the overall basis of their literary production originate now from the south, from their places of origin, be it Peninsular Malaysia, be it the states of Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo and with a northbound motion reach the literary system of Taiwan. Thus, Taipei has become the northernmost, and among the most important production centres of Malaysian Chinese literature and, as one of the most active Chinese-language publishing centres, it has provided Malaysian Chinese writers with a privileged and prosperous cultural environment.

Ng Kim Chew goes as far as to compare the role of Taipei in these authors' literary production to that of Tokyo for the generation of Taiwanese writers educated under Japanese occupation in the 1930s and 1940s.[31] Taipei, which has attracted intellectuals from other Chinese speaking communities (especially from the Philippines, Hong Kong and Singapore) since the 1960s, turned into the "base" for the community of Taiwan-based Malaysians involved in literature and cultural production and apart from books being published, conferences on Malaysian Chinese literature were held regularly in literary circles and schools of humanities of local universities. In the 1960s and 1970s, Malaysian Chinese writers participated quite actively in the Taiwanese literary scene, which fact could exemplify rather well the paradigm of "cultural discovery" and "cultural return" or resinization. They contributed articles and pieces of literature to Taiwan's leading literary magazines such as *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* (中外文學 *Zhongwai wenxue*) and *United Literature* (聯合文學 *Lianhe wenxue*) and launched their own poetical magazines and pamphlets.

[30] ZHANG, Jinzhong. "Xiaoshuo xuanhou: 1969 nian, bie zai tiqi", Sinchow Daily – Wenyi Chunqiu, 12 Sept. 2004.

[31] Ng, Kim Chew, "Zhulun – Mahua wenxue yu zai Taiwan de Zhongguo jingyan." in Ng, Kim Chew, *Mahua Wenxue yu Zhongguoxing*, Taipei: Yuanzun Chubanshe, 1998, p.28.

Things changed somewhat in the late 1980s, when the Nationalist government lifted the martial law and Taiwan began to reshape its own subjectivity, accentuating the peculiarity of its culture, its politics and its ethnic identities. In an island that was drifting further and further away from the Chinese mainland, it was anachronistic to consider Malaysian Chinese Literature as the mere expression of a "return to the Chinese world". Western intellectual theories entering the Taiwanese literary field, such as postmodernism, postcolonialism and globalism put Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan in a new perspective and in an ambiguous position.

The impossibility of a "homecoming" for Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese writers, who developed their literary careers in the nineties, including Ng Kim Chew, becomes a dream impossible to achieve, an unattainable chimera, which however turns into marginal feeling and ceases to haunt them the way it had been haunting their fellow-writers in the late sixties and early eighties. Professor Kuei-Fen Chiu, in a very recent article touches upon the situation:

> They [Ng and his contemporaries writing in the 1990s] have come to realize that the imagined homeland entertained by so many generations of Chinese Malaysians remains an unreachable utopia. It can be found neither in China, nor in Taiwan, nor in anywhere else in the real world. There is no return. Their Chinese imaginary is built on the remains of the past, which continue to exert their fatal attraction […][32]

Taiwan does no longer serve as the home of the authentic Chinese community. Therefore, contemporary Malaysian Chinese authors have partly lost their sense of returning to their Chinese identity through their sojourn on the island and have to come to terms with what Professor Chiu names "traumatic consciousness of their distance from that identity."[33]

[32] On page 606 of Chiu, Kuei-Fen, "Empire of the Chinese Sign: The Question of Chinese Diasporic Imagination in Transnational Literary Production". The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol.67.2 (May 2008): 593-620.
[33] *Ibid.*

Nowadays, literature produced by Malaysian-born authors is seen as basically un-Taiwanese, since it expresses the Malaysian experience of the writers and it is more about the geographical space they have left behind than about the one they are living in at the moment.

According to the Chinese scholar Liu Xiaoxin (劉小新), the reason for the success enjoyed by some Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese writers in the last years has to be found in the qualitative and stylistic differences between Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan and Taiwan literature itself. He points out that "in a society that consumes culture heavily, the Southeast Asian flavour of these Taiwan-based writers and their *Malaysianness* reached the best-selling point of the Taiwanese cultural market." And he continues in a rather frank and outspoken tone and concludes that "Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese authors managed to enter the Taiwanese literary market with their exoticism, their 'otherness' and their 'alternative' aesthetics. These peculiarities have all become part of their survival tactics."[34]

As Zhang Guangda (張光達) observes in one of his articles appeared in the literary supplement to the Malaysian newspaper *Nanyang shangbao* (南洋商報), critics and writers in Malaysia have a certain tendency to see the use of an *exoticised* Malaysia as background to the works of fiction of this Taiwan-based group of authors as mere opportunism and as nothing more than a marketing strategy. They believe that their use, or better, abuse of exoticism and otherness is a way to lift Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan from its marginal position within the Taiwanese literary system.[35] Ultimately, they accuse the Taiwan-based writers of misrepresenting their homeland. These accusations put Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan in a liminal realm between reality and fiction, as writers are expected to be faithful in their depiction of the equatorial homeland, while fulfilling the requirements of fictional works.

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[34] Liu, Xiaoxin. "Lun Huang Jinshu de yiyi he juxian." Renwen Zazhi, 2002,1, 91-100. The original text is in Chinese and reads as follows: "在一個喜歡文化消費的社會，旅台作家的南洋情調或馬來西亞性是打入臺灣文化市場的最佳賣點。" and "以異國情調、'他者'身份和'另類'美學成功介入臺灣文學市場是旅台作家的生存策略". The translation is mine.

[35] Zhang, Guangda. "Mahua lü Tai wenxue de yiyi." Nanyang Shangbao. Nanyang Wenyi. 2002.11.02

What this group of writers have in common, be their stay in Taiwan temporary, be it a long-term residency, is an inability to situate themselves within the borders of the island, but also a difficulty to feel a sense of belonging to the country they were born in. Among these authors, it is thus evident a diasporic phenomenon which positioned them at the borders of the geographical and cultural environment for a long time.

The marginal position occupied by Malaysian Chinese literature within Malaysia's literary polysystem, also affects the position held by Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan and actually the "border condition" is accentuated as writers move to the island. As far as geographic space is concerned, it becomes, as Kim Tong Tee puts it, "a border and transnational literature because it is not situated in the central position of Taiwanese literary polysystem (as well as that of [Malaysian Chinese] literary polysystem) and it is always already bordering and (re)crossing borders, and hence going beyond borderlines."[36]

The group of diasporic writers can also be considered a "literary school", if we take a closer look at the settings and the topics of their works. As far as the setting is concerned, the action of the great majority of the novels and stories takes place in a tropical setting, sometimes presented as mythical, more often reminiscent of the environment in which the author grew up. Thus the rubber forest of peninsular Malaysia is the backdrop of Ng Kim Chew's fiction, while the rainy forest of North Borneo, the Chinese settlements and the indigenous villages of the area provide the scenery for the novels of Li Yongping and Chang Kuei-hsin, among others.

Directly connected to the geographic environment in which the action takes place, is the theme of memory among these authors. Such settings are far from the writer (and from the reader, in most cases) not only on a spatial level, but also on a time level. What comes out of their pen is not present-day peninsular Malaysia or contemporary Borneo. They depict their childhood environment and the Chinese community they were born and raised in, which has, since then, undergone rapid and irreversible changes.

[36] Tee, Kim Tong, "'Literature Without Nation': A Study of 'Mahua Literature in Taiwan' as Transnational Literature." Tamkang Review, 37.2, p.171

Therefore memory, which is shared by this handful of writers and from personal becomes communal and societal, is the link to their homeland. It must be noted that the term "homeland" does not necessarily mean Malaysia or China to them, as they tend to associate Malaysia with the Malay people, while China is seen as a far away country with which they only share linguistic and cultural features, but not a stronger bond of loyalty and identification.

Memory is used as the privileged channel to mediate between their status as voluntary exiles in Taiwan and their sense of belonging to the "homeland", that is the ethnic and cultural specific Malaysian Chinese community. Such community, comparable to many other overseas Chinese communities, has a very specific identity of its own and is a hybrid shaped through centuries of interaction between the Chinese people and the local environment and inhabitants. This is ultimately the message that the authors of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora in Taiwan are trying to convey through their literary production.

Along with memory, the theme of the diaspora as well as issues surrounding cultural identity and voluntary exile have been some of the most significant topics in contemporary Malaysian Chinese literature. The feeling of estrangement and of belonging to neither Malaysia nor China or Taiwan lingers throughout the pages of most of their literary works and Ng Kim Chew declares: "No matter what they write or how they write, no matter whether it is in Taiwan or in Malaysia, they are always foreigners."[37]

Another recurring topic is the relationship between the ethnic Chinese and the local people (the Malays in the case of novels and stories set in peninsular Malaysia and other people of Austronesian origin for fictional works set in Borneo). Interethnic relations, which became rather turbulent after Malaysia's independence and accentuated with the implementation of the NEP in 1971, caused discontent and trauma among Malaysian Chinese who were urged to give up or transfer their cultural allegiance under the obvious and invisible pressure of Malay nationalism. Ng Kim Chew and a handful of other authors focus on the consequences of the daily confrontations between *bumiputra* and Chinese

[37] Ng, Kim Chew, "Fei xie bu ke de liyou", in Ng, Kim Chew, *Wu anming*, Taipei: Jiuge, 1997. p.4

people and represent their ethnic group through various traumatic experiences, such as the impossible nativeness and the fragmented Chineseness.

These authors, and Ng is definitely no exception, are very attentive at depicting the Malay and the Chinese ethnicity through their distinctive traits. Malayness, or Malay identity is described through its core unifying factors: language (*bahasa*), governor (*raja*), a sultan in many Malay states, and the Islamic religion (*agama*), while Chineseness or Chinese identity is stressed out by continuous reference to: language (語言 *yuyan*), culture (文化 *wenhua*), customs (習俗 *xisu*) and tradition (傳統 *chuantong*).[38]

Despite the unity of themes dealt with, the language used is, however, extremely varied and the linguistic strategies developed are very peculiar to each author, ranging from the use of Malay (and/or other Austronesian languages indigenous to the Malay-Indonesian archipelago)[39] words, sentences and even grammatical structures, to the use of a very purified form of Chinese language, to hybridism, where standard Chinese is intermingled with other dialects (Hokkien and Hakka mainly).

Ng Kim Chew opts, more often than not, to stress also linguistically, his non-belonging to what we could call mainstream Chinese culture. In fact, the use of dialectal vocabulary (Hokkien, in his case) and sentence structure as well as the insertion of Malay phrases in his stories is the main characteristic of his literary style, as we will se in the following chapters. If compared to another important Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese writer Li Yongping, for example, the stylistic differences are quite striking. Li's language tends towards purity and the quest for a Chinese literary language devoid of localisms can be felt throughout his literary production. The use of Malay expressions is virtually non-existent in his production. If he does use them, they are normally rendered phonetically in

[38] Ng Kim Chew observes the differences between Malayness and Chineseness in one of his many essays, namely "Mahua wenxue yu (guojia) minzu zhuyi: lun Mahua wenxue de chuanshang xiandaixing". Zhongwai wenxue, 34.8 (2006), pages 175 – 192.
He talks about 馬來特性(*Malai texing*, literally "Malay characteristics"), while he uses 中國性 (*Zhongguoxing* literally "Chineseness") or 中華特性 (*Zhonghua texing*, literally "Chinese characteristics") for Chineseness or Chinese identity, preferring, however, the latter. In fact, he considers that "using Zhonghua texing will be less likely to lead to unnecessary associations, the focus being on (culturally determined) ethnicity and not on nation-state." The original Chinese text reads as follows: "也許用中華特性會比中國性少一些不必要的聯想－重點在（文化界定的）族而非國。" The translation is mine.
[39] The Malay-Indonesian archipelago and all the areas under Malay cultural influence are historically known as *Nusantara*, an area roughly corresponding to present-day Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and southern Thailand.

Chinese characters, while Ng always leaves the original Malay phrase in Latin alphabet in his Chinese-language texts, as will be shown in the analysis of the chosen short story.

III. NG KIM CHEW AND HIS LITERARY PRODUCTION

1. Ng Kim Chew: his life

黃錦樹 (*Huang Jinshu*), or Ng Kim Chew as he prefers to be know in a non-Chinese environment, following the Cantonese pronunciation of his name, was born in 1967 in the state of Johor, the southernmost state of peninsular Malaysia, the setting of many of his stories. He was born and raised into a family of Chinese immigrants, originally from the county of Nan'an (南安), Fujian province.

Growing up in independent Malaysia, he was schooled under the new Malaysian educational system, but his family made sure he would hold onto his Chinese origins by means of fostering a bound between him and the language and culture of his ancestral homeland. Thus, he received a mixed Malay-Chinese education until he graduated from a Chinese independent high school in his native Johor.

In 1986, at the age of nineteen, Ng left his native Malaysia to pursue undergraduate studies in Taiwan, where he enrolled in the Chinese Language and Literature department of the leading university on the island: National Taiwan University (國立臺灣大學 *Guoli Taiwan daxue*). The professional hope of most Malaysian Chinese graduates of Chinese literature was, at the time, to return home and land a teaching position in one of the Chinese independent high schools still functioning in Malaysia. Ng decided not to follow this path and went on to pursue graduate studies in Taiwan, obtaining a Master of Arts degree in Chinese language and literature from Tamkang University (淡江大學 *Danjiang daxue*) in Taipei county and a Doctorate in Chinese literature from National Tsing-Hwa University (國立清華大學 *Guoli Qinghua daxue*) in Hsin-Chu (新竹 *Xinzhu*), a city on Taiwan's east coast.

Eventually he became a long-term resident of Taiwan with the right of abode on the island but not a citizen of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and has settled, with his wife and his two children, in the town of Puli (埔里), in central Taiwan where he is currently a

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professor of creative writing and Chinese literature in the Department of Chinese language and literature of National Chi Nan University (國力暨南國際大學 *Guoli Jinan guoji daxue*).

Ng makes frequent trips to his native Malaysia, where his mother still lives, but so far he has shown no intention of moving back there. These travels, or more precisely the memories they recall, are his main source of literary inspiration.

2. Ng Kim Chew: his literary career and his *Malaysian-Chineseness*

Ng Kim Chew is a versatile literary personality, being active as a novelist and literary creator, but also as a literary critic, with a long list of publications to his name on Chinese literature and Malaysian Chinese literature in both academic journals and magazines aimed at the general public in Taiwan, Hong Kong and in his native Malaysia.

Ng Kim Chew's literary career started in Taiwan, where he has now resided for over twenty years. Ng himself, in an article published in 2005 in the literary supplement of the 星洲日報 (*Xingzhou ribao*), and later on used as an introduction to one of his short stories collections, namely 土與火 (*Tu yu huo*) – *Tanah Melayu*, recalls with a nostalgic and highly poetic tone, his first arrival on the island and his first steps in the world of creative writing:

> The 28th of September of 2004 will be the eighteenth anniversary of my arrival to Taiwan. When I was nineteen years old, on that same 28th of September I came to Taiwan to pursue my university studies. I remember it was early autumn, the air was chilly and it was the mid-autumn festival. The period of time I have spent in Taiwan is almost as long as the time I lived in Malaysia. During these eighteen years, many things have changed. Without noticing it, I approached my forties and I have begun to feel old.

> During my university years, I started to write fiction. At first, it was a reaction to the bed quality of the works that were awarded literary prizes; what a megalomaniac I was! To be honest, I was very poor at the time, and the money I could earn by winning a literary award would be a good on-the-side income. As a poor student, that was the only reason I entered the literary world and I was not moved by other ideals such as continuing the "tiny joss-stick" of Malaysian Chinese literature, or writing a new chapter in the history of literature. I was more practical than my predecessors and I knew that writing novels would eventually lead me to starvation and I wouldn't dare dreaming of becoming a professional writer. […] The writing of essays became my routine, while fiction writing turned into a side activity […][40]

Among his works of fiction, worth mentioning here are the collections of short stories or novelettes 夢與豬與黎明 (*Meng yu zhu yu liming*, which I translate as "Dreams, pigs and daybreak") published in 1994 by Jiuge Publishing House (九歌出版社) and 烏暗瞑 (*Wu anming*, which could be translated as "Dark nights" or "Darkness at dawn"), published three years later by the same publisher. In 2001 Cité Press, a Taiwanese publishing house with branches in Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur as well, published a new collection of short stories by Ng, autobiographical for the most part, as was the case in his earlier collections. The book, edited by renowned Taiwan-born literary critic and professor of Chinese literature at Columbia University David Der-Wei Wang (王德威) was titled 由島至島 (*You dao zhi dao*) – *Dari Pulau Ke Pulau*, which means "From island to island".

[40] The original Chinese text that follows appeared for the first time in the 星洲日報・文藝春秋 (*Xingzhou ribao – Wenyi chunqiu*) on May 1, 2005. The translation is mine and is based on the text as reproduced in the introduction to the volume *Tu yu huo – Tanah Melayu*. The original text reads as follows: "二〇〇四年九月二十八日就是我來台的十八週年紀念，十九歲那年的九月十八日來台求學。記得是初秋，微涼，中秋節。在台居留的日子幾呼就跟在馬的日子一樣長了。十八年裡，物換星多，不知不覺年近不或，微微感覺到老了。
大學時代開始學寫小說，最初不過是嫌別人得獎作品差，「彼可取而代也」；也實在因為太窮了，文學獎獎金可補濟生活。窮學生的臨時起意，並不是為了替馬華文學延續那「微細的一線香，更別說是為文學史續一章。我比前輩務實，知道寫小說會餓死，不感心存僥倖想當傳業做家 […] 論文寫作成了常規，而小說寫作幾呼成了可有可無之事 […]"

The title, as can be clearly seen, is in both Chinese and Malay, thus asserting his peculiar position within the Chinese/Taiwanese world and his homeland. In 2005 Ng published 土與火 (*Tu yu huo*) – *Tanah Melayu*, his latest collection of short stories to date. Despite the volume having a double title as the previous one, this time the Malay title is not a literal translation of the Chinese one. In fact, the Chinese title can be translated as "Land and fire", while the Malay title carries unmistakable ethnic and possessive features, as it means literally "The land of the Malay people", entering thus in the terrain of interethnic relations and ethnic rights, a very touchy issue, as we already saw, in post-independence Malaysia.

Apart from the abovementioned collections, his short stories have often been published in literary magazines, newspapers' literary supplements in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

He is a well-established fiction writer in both Taiwan and Malaysia, which thing is shown by the number of literary prizes he has received so far. He has been the recipient of the "United Daily Literary Award" (聯合報文學獎), of the "China Times Literary Award" (時報文學獎), of the "Youshi Wenyi World Fiction in Chinese Award" (幼獅文藝世界華文成長小說獎) and of the "Bing Xin Best Novel Award" (冰心小說獎), among others. Despite the many recognitions awarded to him, he has an ambivalent relationship with fame and literary awards. As he himself stated in an interview in 2005:

> […] literary awards are like a driver's licence; they are an important mechanism of general approval within the literary system (many people outside the literary circles assess a writer's ability according to whether he was awarded any literary prize). In Taiwan there are too many of them, every county-level newspaper and municipality-level magazine sets up its own literary award (from the China Times to the Liberty Times),[41] and there are even private enterprise-funded ones […], but the contradiction is that faith in literature is close to collapsing.

[41] Two of the most read and respected Taiwanese daily papers, respectively known in Chinese as "中國時報" (Zhongguo shibao) and "自由時報" (Shiyou shibao).

> But all in all, the situation of Malaysian Chinese literature is not as bad, be it in Taiwan or in Malaysia it still is a craftsman tradition. But I do believe that literary prizes should not be awarded yearly. To award them every other year or once every three years seems good enough to me. There aren't so many new talents after all. But it's true, however, that literary awards are a form of social support to spice up the general public and to boost the organizers' ego. They are, at the same time, a commercial show and a type of social ceremony.[42]

The characteristic of his short stories is probably the setting: peninsular Malaysia's rubber forest (馬來西亞半島膠林 *Malaixiya bandao liaolin*), the major landscape of Ng's native state of Johor. It appears, to most readers, as an intricate and labyrinthine tangle of rubber tree branches, narrow dirt paths, huts inhabited by people of Austronesian race and houses where ethnic Chinese dwelled, reminiscent of the Chinese architectural tradition. Therefore, the exoticism of his short stories is undeniable; however, it must not be confused with a wilful attempt to use an *exoticised* backdrop as a marketing strategy. Even those short stories set in Taiwan, which however he only timidly began to uses as a backdrop in a few novelettes of his latest short stories collection, are imbued in the flavour of the "South Seas" (南洋 *nanyang*) and the ties to peninsular Malaysia are strong, and are underlined through various techniques such as memory, the depiction of Malaysian Chinese characters, the portrayal of traditional customs from Malaysia or the insertion of Malay words within the Chinese text.

[42] The interview was published in Chinese in the Malaysian newspaper 星洲日報 (*Xingzhou ribao*) on November 6th, 2005. The translation is mine and is based on the text as reproduced in the introduction to the volume *Tu yu huo – Tanah Melayu*. The original text reads as follows: "…文學獎如同駕照，是文學體制內重要的公共認可機制（很多外行人評估一個作家優秀與否直接就看他得過甚麼獎）。臺灣的文學獎其實是過剩，各縣市報章都有辦文學獎（從中國時報到自由時報），[…] 但矛盾的是，文學的信仰接近崩潰。馬華相比之下似乎還好，不論是旅臺還是在馬，都是手工業傳世統。不過我覺得文學獎不必非得年年辦，隔年或三年辦一次都可以。畢竟沒那麼多新人。但文學獎有是其實是一種社會贊助，讓外行看熱鬧，讓贊助人龍心大悅，文學獎同時是一種商業表演，也是一種社會儀式。"

Ng's stories are based, for the most part, on his personal experiences and narrate life in the community he hails from. Thus, the main characters are ethnic Chinese and people of other ethnic backgrounds (mainly Malays, occasionally Indians) are usually depicted as "the other" (他人) as seen through the eyes of an overseas Chinese character. Being it a common feature of the entire body of Malaysian literature, in Malaysia as well as in Taiwan, Ng and many other Malaysian Chinese writers were not spared criticism, to which he answered in a rather straightforward manner:

> […]I can't help but laughing, when people challenge our constant portrayal of Chinese people and the consequent indifference to Malay or Indian people. Aren't important Malay authors always writing about Malay people? Most writers don't even bother to change the background of their stories, unless they had a complicated life like Conrad or Graham Green. Writing about the hundreds of aspects of life and about every situation is the standard poetics of social realism. If I have to choose, I prefer to be a modernist and follow the steps of Lu Xun (魯迅). [43]

Thus Ng's Malaysian experiences are the main pit from which he collects ideas for his writings and the core of his production lays in the practice of portraying and stressing an atmosphere totally foreign to the Taiwanese reader. Despite what Ng himself asserts, by using his first-hand experiences as the basis of his literary works, he is indeed following a realist path, although a personal and practical one, based solely on those aspects of life he can actually relate to. Ng Kim Chew ultimately narrates one single story: the story of the rubber forest (膠林 *liaolin*) and its inhabitants, told from different angles and by different voices.

[43] The text appears in the same interview in the 星洲日報 (*Xingzhou ribao*) of November 6th, 2005. The translation is mine, the original text reads as follows: "[…] 有人質疑我們老是寫華人不寫馬來人印度人，不禁失笑。馬來大小説家不也只是寫馬來人——大部分作家甚至反復寫單一的背景，除非你身世複雜如康拉德如葛林。寫盡人生百態，寫各行各業，那是社會寫實的規範詩學；相較之下，我寧願當個魯迅式的現代主義者。"

The realistic portrayal of peninsular Malaysia that comes out from Ng's pen is an affirmation of love and devotion to his childhood, to his memories and ultimately to his community. Despite the hardships with which ethnic Chinese have been confronted in a *Bumiputra*-dominated world since the independence of Malaya from British rule, Ng's connection to Malaysia is undeniable.

Ng Kim Chew has an ambivalent attachment to his birthplace; it is a relationship of love and repulsion at the same time, as Prof. Chiu also suggests, which imbues most of his writings with a traumatic atmosphere. [44]

The special connection Ng has with his own birthplace leads us to discuss Ng's idea about his own identity as a Malaysian Chinese.

As stated earlier in this paper, nowadays Chineseness is not the main concern of these writers, and Ng Kim Chew is definitely no exception. He does not feel he belongs to China, the land of his ancestors, which is described, in his works, as a foreign land, a "somewhere" he is only vaguely tied to.

On the other hand, Taiwan has been steadily losing its position as the "guardian" or the "keeper" of the authentic Chinese culture; therefore, it is most unlikely that a person of Chinese origin born in Malaysia, whose ancestral home is located somewhere in south-eastern China, has a very high degree of identification with Taiwan.

Ng does not identify himself with Malaysia either, since as an ethnic Chinese, he is not allowed by Malaysian official discourse to be part of the "authentic" Malay-turned-Malaysian society, i.e. the *Bumiputra*-dominated one. He is inevitably seen as "the other" by the Malays, who in turn are portrayed as "the other" in his stories, as if reality were nothing but a mirror image.

Ironically, what we perceive by reading Ng's stories is that he identifies himself not with a nation, or a region, or a state, and not even a society. His identity falls within a very limited geospatial place: the ethnic Chinese community of peninsular Malaysia. His identity is clearly Malaysian Chinese, that is to say, he empathizes with the geographical areas inhabited by the community he hails from, but which he has left behind years ago, embarking on a journey of voluntary exile.

[44] Chiu, Kuei-Fen, "Empire of the Chinese Sign: The Question of Chinese Diasporic Imagination in Transnational Literary Production". The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol.67.2 (May 2008): 593-620.

Thus, he is the representative of what could be defined as *Malaysian-Chineseness*, an identity connected to Chineseness, but not determined by it. In sum, it could be said that *Malaysian-Chineseness* is a multiple identity in the formation of which various factors play a major role: the cultural/linguistic/traditional factor (the local Chinese culture – mainly Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka – carried by Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia), the geographical factor (the equatorial environment), and the social interaction factor (the relationship between the Chinese and the non-Chinese).

Ng Kim Chew has not written any novel or longer story[45] so far and, despite the great popularity enjoyed by short stories in the Sinophone literary world, he has often been asked whether he has the intention of penning a novel and why hasn't he done it yet. Ng believes in the total freedom of an author to choose the topics and the format he prefers and therefore he answers the question rather bluntly:

> […] I am often asked when I will write a novel. It is similar to the period immediately following my marriage when everyone kept asking when I would have children. Some people like to procreate before marriage, some like to do it after, others like to have children outside the marital bound, while some people don't want to have children at all and it is nobody's business but their own. Is it mandatory to write novels? This question is quite similar to "Is it mandatory to have a son?"[46]

As a literary critic and scholar, apart from his contributions to prestigious journals in the fields of Chinese literature and literary theory, he has also edited various collections of essays that deal specifically with Malaysian Chinese literature or with the wider realm

[45] The Chinese literary tradition divides fiction works into four categories: 長篇小說(changpian xiaoshuo) or novel,中篇小說(duanpian xiaoshuo) or novella, 短篇小說(duanpian xiaoshuo) or short story/novelette and小小說 (xiao xiaoshuo) or mini-fiction. Please note that in this paper, short story and novelette are used interchangeably.

[46] *Ibid*. The translation of the original text is mine: "[…]常被問起何時寫長篇。如同婚後那段日子，常被問起何時生小孩。有的人喜歡在婚前生，有的喜歡在婚後生，有的婚外生，有的不想生，實在不管旁人的事。非寫長篇不可嗎？這問題有點像"非生兒子不可嗎？"

of Chinese literature. Some of the volumes are: 馬華文學 與中國性 (*Mahua wenxue yu Zhongguoxing*: Malaysian Chinese Literature and Chineseness) and 想像的本邦：現代文學十五論 (*Xiangxiang de benban: riandai wenxue shiwu lun* – National Imaginaries: Fifteen Perspectives on Modern Chinese Literature). He has also edited anthologies of sinophone literature, among which the most important is probably 別再提起－馬華當代小說選 1997 – 2003 (*Bie zai tiqi: mahua dangdai xiaoshuo 1997- 2003* – Don't Look Back: a Selection of Malaysian Chinese Fiction Between 1997 and 2003).

All his collections of short stories and the volumes of literary criticism were published in Taiwan, but their distribution has not been limited to the island and has reached a wider Chinese-language readership, especially in Malaysia and Singapore and in the former British colony of Hong Kong. Readers from other overseas Chinese communities, especially in North American Chinese literary circles, have also shown a certain degree of interest in his productions.

3. Ng Kim Chew: his ideas on Chinese literature and language

One of the reasons for the interest shown by overseas Chinese intellectuals in his writings has to be found, in my opinion, in his ideas on what can be considered "Chinese literature". Ng does not think that such label should belong exclusively to literature produced on the Chinese mainland or by authors born on the Chinese mainland and considers that any piece of literature written using Chinese characters, not necessarily following the grammar of Mandarin Chinese, as the right to be included in the system of Chinese literature. By comparing his compatriot Chang Kuei-Hsin's *The Primate Cup* (猴杯 *Houbei*) to mainland novelist Mo Yan (莫言)'s *Red Sorghum* (紅高粱 *Hong gaoliang*), Ng affirms the right of authors from outside the Chinese borders to have a righteous position within Chinese literature seen as a transnational literature, not dissimilar to what Su Shi-mei calls "sinophone literature". Concerning the comparison, Ng states:

> Of course Chinese writers and scholars will regard this kind of comparison as not worthy of serious consideration,

> because Sino-centric consciousness will lead them to acknowledge themselves, and thus China, as the sole representatives of Chinese, while I, on the contrary, attempt to break the link between the Chinese language and China. Literary criticism is unavoidably connected to politics and when a situation such as [the discussions aroused by the comparison I proposed] comes into being, it is far better to ignore it than to provoke a debate. A confrontation would lead them [Chinese intellectuals] to mistake our ideas for a desire to receive their recognition.[47]

The excerpt above shows a rather poignant personality and a serious commitment to the improvement of the way overseas Chinese writers are perceived. The need of categorization and standardization of literatures written in Chinese, leads Ng to propose the concept of "Chinese literature without nation", (無國籍華文文學 *wu guoji huawen wenxue* in Chinese). It is therefore clear that the core of the Sinophone literary system does not lie in the geographical realm, but solely in the linguistic and, to a lesser extent, ethnic one. This becomes evident when we carry out an analysis of the Chinese phrase. 無國籍 literally means "without citizenship/nationality", thus it denotes a lack of attachment or belonging to any politically constructed country contained within arbitrary boundaries. The most interesting word is probably 華文, which we can only translate as "Chinese" or "Chinese language" in English and other Western languages.[48] Ng chooses not to use the term 中文 (zhongwen), commonly used in China, nor the term 國文 (guowen), the common denomination of the Chinese language in Taiwan. He purposely underlines that only the language in which a piece of literature is written can be a discriminating factor when inserting it into a literary system. 華文 has no direct connection to a country, but

[47] From an interview appeared in the 星洲日報 (Xingzhou ribao) on November 6th, 2005. The translation is mine, the original text reads as follows: "當然這種比較中國的作家學者大概會不屑一顧，因為中原 意識會讓他們自認只有他們可以代表中文－中國，而我一直企圖把中文和中國之間的聯接線切斷。文學評價離不開政治，如果碰到前述情況，「不要理它」也比爭辯 好。爭辯會讓他們誤會我們渴望獲得他們的承認."

[48] For example, the Malay language distinguishes, like Chinese does, between *bahasa Tionghoa* (中華文) and *bahasa Cina* (中國文). To make the distinction explicit in English as well, we could translate 華文 as "the language of the Chinese", while rendering 中文 with the expression "the language of China"

only to a culture, the Chinese culture, which can be maintained alive in China proper, in Taiwan, as well as among the various overseas Chinese communities spread throughout the globe. However, it must be noted that the term used by Ng also carries a strong ethnic component. In fact, it is a direct derivation of the word 中華 (*zhonghua*), which denotes the "Chinese people" as an ethnic group. Ng himself admits the difficulty of finding the most appropriate definition, taking the Taiwanese case as an example,

> The use of either 'literature by ethnic Chinese' or 'literature in the Chinese language' is problematic. For example, Taiwanese literature under Japanese occupation was written, for the most part, in Japanese; contemporary Taiwan aboriginal literature is produced by non-ethnic Chinese authors, but the language used is indeed Chinese. No matter whether we stress language or ethnicity, both denominations cannot avoid being superficial. Probably using the phrase "literature without nation" would be most encompassing.[49]

And again on the linguistic features of Malaysian Chinese literature, Ng pinpoints the differences between the use of *huawen* and *zhongwen*. The first is closely linked to childhood memories, to the scents and the flavours, the sounds and the landscape of their native equatorial homeland. On the other hand, the latter gives the written page a more scholarly relish, closer to the classical variety of the language. Ng believes that both Li Yongpìng and Chang Kuei-Hsin have successfully passed from *huawen* to *zhongwen*, while he is still moving in the realm of *huawen* and shows no desire of crossing the border between the two varieties of the language.[50]

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[49] Ng Kim Chew. "Wu guoji huawen wenxue: zaitai Mahua wenxue de shiqianshi, huo Taiwan wenxue shishang de feiTaiwan wenxue—yige wenxueshi de bijiao gangling" Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies [文化研究 Wenhua Yanjiu] 2 (2006): 211–52. The original text is in Chinese and reads as follows; the translation is mine: "不論用華人文學還是華文文學，都有其困難。譬如日據時代臺灣文學，主要用語是日文；當代臺灣原住民文學，寫作者非華人，卻是以中文寫作。不論是文還是人，命名上都有其權宜性，也許用「無國籍文學」較周圓。"

[50] Ng clarifies the idea in an article published on the 聯合文學 (*Lianhe wenxue*) literary magazine. Ng, Kim Chew. "Huawen de zaoyu", United Literature Monthly,

The theme of language is a recurring one in Ng's body of ideas on literature. In an interview, which appeared in the cultural insert of Malaysia's leading Chinese language newspaper, he strongly opposes the general idea that overseas Chinese, and Malaysian Chinese in particular, should feel obliged to use their ethnic language in their literary production. He instead advocates for freedom of choice, when it comes to the language in which each author develops his literary career. Ng states that

> The realm of Sinophone literature is vast and the use of the Chinese language should not constitute an ethnic dilemma. Many Malaysian Chinese writers shield the official discourse, which they see as the only possible choice. However, it is not the case and to me, the problem is not linguistic in nature. Many Malaysian Chinese writers put language in the first place and that is the real problem. […] Why is it mandatory for us to write in Chinese in Malaysia? We should be writing for the sake of literature, and what language we use should be a secondary matter. For example, if an author is more fluent in the Malay language, then he should write in Malay and be on the same level of ethnic Malay writers. Malaysia has quite a large number of brilliant Anglophone writers, all of Chinese origin, but why do we always marginalize them? If Malaysian Chinese literature cannot get over its provincialism, how can it possibly have an international perspective? What is the role of Malaysian Chinese literature in the Sinophone literary polysystem? Honestly, I think it is just a small fry.[51]

[51] Originally published in the 星洲日報・星洲人物 (*Xingzhou ribao – Xingzhou Renwu*) on September 7, 1997. The original Chinese text, whose English translation is mine, reads as follows: "華人文學的領域本來就很廣，中文寫作不應該是一個關係民族道德的問題。許多馬華作家一直在防衛著官方論述，認爲它是唯一選擇。其實沒有這回事。對於我，語言不是問題。許多把語言放在第一位，這是一個大問題。[…] 用什麼語言寫作都不重要。譬如說，你最擅長馬來文，就用馬來文寫作，和馬來作家平起平坐。馬來西亞有不少優秀的英文作家，都是華人，爲什麼我們始終排斥他們呢？馬華文學不能走出自己，有怎麼會有國際視野？談到世界華文文學，馬華文學在世界華文文學裏算老幾？坦白說，什麼都不是！"

With these very critical views of the Malaysian Chinese literary community, Ng Kim Chew is ultimately voicing out his concern about the lack of true "storytellers" among Malaysian Chinese writing in Chinese, who are involved in a sterile debate over *how/in what language* stories should be told, instead of worrying themselves about *what type* of stories should be told. In these straightforward words by Ng, we can take glimpses at the *troubadour* in him. "To tell" (講 *jiang*) is, as a matter of fact, the central verb in Ng's poetics; a verb that emanates the flavours and the colours of a landscape, a tradition, and a community retold anew, regardless of the language used. Chinese is a means to convey more effectively his personal experiences to the reader, and it should not be mistaken with an ethnic stance, i.e. the main tool of reaffirmation of his Chineseness.

Although Ng points out that claiming the use of the Chinese language is essential to the survival of the overseas Chinese communities as such, giving up its use in the literary realm does not necessarily mean an estrangement from *Malaysian-Chineseness*.

IV. "HUO YU TU": A LITERARY ANALYSIS

1. *土與火 (Tu yu huo) – Tanah Melayu*: the short-story collection

The collection of short stories that Ng Kim Chew published in 2001 由島至島 (*You dao zhi dao*) – *Dari Pulau Ke Pulau* is clearly a metaphor for his diasporic journey from Malaysia to Taiwan.

In *土與火 (Tu yu huo) – Tanah Melayu* (*Tu yu huo* hereafter), published four years later, the island of Taiwan becomes the landscape of a few short stories, whereas until then, it was never the backdrop where the action took place. Nevertheless, Ng is still carried away, into a region of dreams, which materializes in his native peninsular Malaysia and his

childhood and adolescence home. That is the reason why I am not keen to consider *Tu yu huo* any different from his previous volumes of fiction: it is yet another narration of diasporic nature, where the homeland and the new home coexist, with a clear predominance of the first.

Tu yu huo has a title in the Malay language, apart from its Chinese one, like 由島至島 (*You dao zhi dao*) – *Dari Pulau Ke Pulau*. "Tanah Melayu", as I already mentioned in the previous chapter, literally means "the land of the Malay people", and it is also the old indigenous name of peninsular Malaysia. The use of a Malay title in a volume published in Taiwan, where almost nobody is capable of understanding the language, is an affirmation of the author's condition as a member of two societies, the adopted one – Taiwan, and the original one living on Malay soil – the Malaysian Chinese. And yet, the "Tanah Melayu" also has the task of clarifying the actual meaning of "land/soil" and "fire" of the Chinese title. If land belongs to the Malay people, fire is inevitably associated with his own Malaysian Chinese community, with the light (燈火 *denghuo*) spreading from the traditional Chinese house of his family. It is also a hidden political stance and with a metaphorical language used throughout the volume, reminds us that, after fifty years from Malaysia's independence, the homestead of the ethnic Chinese is actually "the land of the Malay people".

The volume consists of twelve short stories, including one formed by thirteen mini-fictions, namely 風景 (*Fengjing*). It is interesting to note that the novelette opening the collection and the one closing it are mirror texts, as the titles clearly show. The former, which will be analysed in this chapter, is titled 火與土 (*Huo yu tu*, i.e. "Fire and Land"), while the latter shares its title with the volume.

In both stories, the narrator takes his son to his hometown, on an inverse and highly symbolic diasporic journey in order to attend a funeral, but if we take a closer look to the metaphoric meaning of each novelette the differences are striking. In *Huo yu tu* both the old house and the surrounding bushes have been destroyed by the powerful rage of fire. This material destruction, on a metaphoric level, indicates the burning of the memories of ethnic Chinese concerning their communal space on Malaysian soil. On the other hand, newly arrived immigrants from the Indonesian islands (from the Island of Roti – *Pulau*

Roti – in the specific case), due to their ethnical proximity to the Malays, turn themselves, with despising attitude and intrepid force, into the owners of the land formerly belonging to the family of the narrator, and in violation of the laws regulating private property, build their own village there. However, it is not the ethnic problem that interests Ng Kim Chew the most. This allegory of the story is of a wider proportion and falls within the greater problem of migration. The life of migrants in Malaysia and Indonesia is a restless movement from island to island and is characterized by the difficulty of finding a place they can call home. From a personal perspective – and not from an ethnic perspective – the relationship with land does not have much to do with the time of arrival. Whether it is the ethnic Chinese we talk about, or new Indonesian immigrants, both groups do not enjoy the status of *Bumiputra*, therefore they lived for generations (in the case of the Chinese) and are most probably bound to live for generations to come (in the case of the Indonesians) on borrowed land.

Tu yu huo, on the other hand, transforms the diasporic narration into a clan or family story. The land, a lot amidst rubber trees and tropical vegetation, which was bought by the local Chinese association, is the land where the deceased is buried, while the fire of the tile is the one used to cremate the deceased.

On another level, we could also consider the land as the place where life begins, from which sprouts slowly come to surface and the fire as the initiator of a fresh new start. Therefore, fire and land, in this story, become the symbols of life and death, and ultimately of the whole cycle of life.

In the collection, other two stories specifically deal with the Chinese community in Malaysia, namely 我的朋友鴨都拉 (*Wo de pengyou Yadula*, which could be translated as "My friend Abdullah" in English) and 第四人稱 (*Di si rencheng*, i.e. "The fourth person"). The first deals with an interethnic relationship between a Malaysian Chinese man and a Malay woman and follows the couple from their first encounter, through their marriage, to their divorce. The latter insists on the theme of a multiethnic Malaysia by portraying an ethnic Chinese man and an ethnic Indian lady helping each other out in times of poverty. In both stories lingers an idea, or perhaps I should define it as an "ideal" of

interethnic/intercommunity interaction, mutual help ultimately leading to a Malaysia for all Malaysians and not only a state built to cater to the need of the *Bumiputra*.

Even those stories set in Taiwan are undeniably immersed in an easily recognizable "South seas" flavour (南洋味道 *nanyang weidao*), which is central to each one of them. In some of them the main character often is the narrator's father and his visit to Taiwan ties, in a highly symbolic manner, the Taiwan-based narrator to his original community in Johor, peninsular Malaysia.

In the ninth novelette of the volume, titled 土地公 (*Tudigong*)[52], two cats appear in the story and they are named Bumi and Putra. As can be clearly seen, if we unite the two names, we end up having the word *Bumiputra*.[53] With such device, Ng achieves what many other Malaysian Chinese authors have been trying hard for: to satirize and to mock the "Malaysia for the Malays" idea without directly involving himself in the political debate. As the multiracial population of Malaysia and its diversity, which should be enriching, remains a fundamental stumbling-block, Ng Kim Chew tries, as light-heartedly as possible, to demonstrate the negative impact on the Malaysian Chinese population of the concept coined by Tunku Abdul Raman of a *Bumiputra* race, and the political, social and economic privileges that should be accorded to those falling within that racial category.

This latest collection of novelettes by Ng Kim Chew underlines, probably more than any other writing he has penned before, the position of the author in a sort of limbo in between two worlds, the one he left, yet not completely – the Malaysian Chinese community, and the one he is currently living in, yet where he is not fully integrated –

[52] A very popular deity in the Chinese folk religion and Taoist pantheon, *Tudigong* is the deity in charge of administering the village affairs. Generally, *Tudigong* is portrayed as an old man with a long white beard, hence the nickname of "Grandpa" (土地爺 *tudiye* or 大伯公 *dagongpo* in Chinese) given to him in Malaysia and Singapore. The worship of this deity is very ancient. In fact, he is already mentioned in the ancient Chinese text左轉 – 通俗篇 (*Zuo Zhuan –Tongsu pian* or *Commentary of Zuo- Popular section*), where it is written: 「凡有社里，必有土地神，土地神為守護社里之主，謂之上公。」 (In every community, there needs to be a deity of the land. This deity of the land is the main guardian of the community, and he is therefore called "the superior grandfather".) The translation is mine.
A small shrine to the deity can be built within private houses, however almost every village has a 土地廟 (*tudi miao*), a tiny temple housing the statue of the village god, and occasionally of his wife, known as *Tudipo* (土地婆 *tudipo*). Such places of worship are extremely popular in Taiwan, among overseas Chinese communities (especially in Southeast Asia) originally from the Fujian area and, to a lesser extent, in Hong Kong, Macau and Cantonese/Hakka communities abroad.

[53] For an explanation of the term *bumiputra*, please refer to II.1

Taiwanese society. His situation, therefore, is not dissimilar to that of many other diasporic writers. The comparison to the Jamaican-born and England-based cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall, seems rather appropriate to me. Discussing the topic of immigration, Hall has said that every immigrant must face two recurring questions, sooner or later during their stay in a foreign land: "Why are you here?" and "When are you going back home?"[54] The questions examined by Hull and translated to a literary realm are not dissimilar to the questions Ng has been asked throughout his career, namely: "Why are you writing about your native environment here in Taiwan?" and "When will you start writing about your own Taiwan experience?" With *Tu yu huo*, Ng Kim Chew has probably succeeded in answering both questions, as his Taiwanese experience could not exist without his native Malaysia, thus there are no Malaysian Chinese stories and Taiwanese stories in the collection. On the contrary, these are stories about Ng's own world and his own perception of the two environments. Each and every novelette in the volume is ambivalent and can function as a story about the Malaysian Chinese community, be the backdrop Taiwan, be it Malaysia and at the same time it can be seen as a portrayal of the authors own experience of personal and cultural development on the island of Taiwan, without ever losing sight of his native place, surfacing sometimes as personal memories, sometimes as memories at the community level.

2. 火與土 *(Huo yu tu)*: a literary analysis

2.1 The themes

Huo yu tu can be considered as a walk along memory lane. The plot of this probably autobiographical novelette[55] is simple and serves the author as a mere starting point to develop a writing imbued with memories and with the urge of passing these memories to the next generation, which takes the shape of the narrator's son, in the specific case.

[54] Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," Identity: The Real Me, ICA Documents 6 (London, 1988), 44.
[55] I consider the novelette to be autobiographic in nature, although it is never labelled as such by the writer. However, the landscape and most of the situations match perfectly with what we know about the author's personal life and with the descriptions he gave of his native Johor, in other occasions.

The narration starts with a death lingering through the first lines.[56] In fact, the narrator returns to his hometown to attend his father-in-law's funeral. His wife and younger daughter, due to undisclosed reasons, go back to Taiwan shortly after, while he, together with his son, agrees to his mother's request to stay a little longer.

During his stay, the narrator takes the chance to introduce his child to his own childhood environment. The journey through personal memory, combined with recollections of community life, is indeed a physical one. We follow, in the first pages of the story, the narrator/ three-year-old son couple as they move in two directions: a spatial one, through a small path among the intricate equatorial vegetation, which will eventually lead them to the site of the narrator's old home, and a temporal one from the starting point, symbolizing the present to the arrival point, symbolizing the past, or more precisely, the loss of it.

The attachment of the narrator to his childhood memories is strong and incomprehensible to the people around him. When he shows repeated interest in visiting their old house across the rubber forest his mother does not approve of his curiosity and warns him of the possibility that he might not find what he is looking for:

> 母親說，你怎麼那麼念舊，早就沒有人想去了。伊說，要小心，已經不是原來的樣子了。認不得了。
> **(p.23)**
> ***My mother told me: "How can you be so attached to the past? Nobody wants to go there anymore." Then she added: "Be careful! It is not the way it used to be and you will probably not recognize it."***[57]

Changes become evident as soon as the narrator/son duo step onto the path, and the strength of this transformation is expressed by the continuous repetition of the word "改變" (*gaibian*):

[56] For precision's sake, I should talk about "columns", since the novelette is contained in a volume published in Taiwan, in traditional Chinese and following the traditional Chinese writing order, from the upper right corner to the lower left one.

[57] The translations from the original Chinese text of this and all of the following excerpts are mine and may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, without prior permission.

十多年來，沿路的景觀有著巨大的改變，而最根本的改變是路本身的。它改變甚至決定了抵達的方式。 **(p.24)**

Over the past ten years, the landscape along the path changed tremendously, but it was the path itself that underwent the most essential transformation. Its change even involved the route to arrive to destination.

The main character's stubbornness regarding the other side of the path/journey is repeated at various moments during the narration:

又一個無聊煩悶的日午，帶著小孩子跨上破機車，又往舊園去。**(p.31)**

On another boring and depressing noon, I took again my son on a ride to the old garden again with my half-broken motorcycle.

And again, a few pages later, another paragraph starts in the following way:

又一個日午，我們離開了前最後一次造訪。沒有時間了，準備比上一次走的更遠了，以結束這莫名惘然的旅程。 **(p.38)**

Another day, at noon, we went over for a last visit before leaving. Time did not allow us to go further than on our previous occasion and we couldn't fully complete this awkward and frustrating journey.

The narrator acts clearly as guide to his son, trying to introduce him to what once was the only reality he knew and takes him onto a journey of discovery:

對兒子說：**"我們再去探險。"(p.39)**

I told my son: "Let's go on another exploration."

Across the intricate and labyrinthine path, the author/narrator is confronted with his memories and with the changes, all negative, which took place during the years of his absence. What once was a luxuriant vegetable garden – symbolizing the take of possession of the soil, not only by the narrators' parents, but by the ethnic Chinese community in general – surrounding the old house, where the narrator used to live with his family, and built just outside the rubber forest,

> 母親種花，鳳仙和紫薇；屋旁剩地，種了茄子辣椒苦瓜和蝦夷蔥。**(p.31)**
>
> ***Mother used to plant flowers, birthworts and violet crape myrtles. On the terrain around the house, she would plant aubergines, chilli peppers, bitter melons and chives.***
>
> 父親種的東西種類得不可思議，果樹之外，芋頭、南瓜、木薯、山藥、空心菜、芥蘭菜、韭菜、高粱 **[…]** 只有像馬鈴薯、小紅蔥頭、蒜頭、大洋蔥之類常吃的進口貨，及因天氣太熱種不起來的但不常吃的大白菜高麗菜蒜苗。**(p.34-35)**
>
> ***Apart from fruit trees, father used to plant an incredible variety of vegetables such as taro, pumpkin, cassava, mountain yam, water spinach, broccoli, garlic chives, sorghum […], so that we would only buy common imported goods such as potatoes, garlic, small red onions and big ones or vegetables that would not grow due to the torrid weather such as white cabbage, Chinese cabbage and garlic stems, which we would not eat very often anyways.***

has become a wild and neglected bunch of trees, a cause of regret for the narrator:

> 雖然榴蓮樹都長得很大，正是結果的好年華。但一切都野了。"如果爸爸還在，"我常不自禁的對妻感嘆。"那會是孩子最好的樂園。"**(p.29)**
>
> ***Although the durian trees were growing beautifully as a result of the very good year, they had all been left***

untrimmed. "Were my dad still alive," I would often say to my wife, unable to avoid sighing, "this would be our children's best playground."

園的邊界快速被沙土落葉野草填平。父親故後，母親笑著說"你爸的鋤頭沒人要接了。"(p.38)

The borders of the garden where rapidly filled with sand, fallen leaves and weed. After my father passed away, mother would joke: "Nobody wants to get close to your father's hoe."

or turned into a burnt mound not even remotely reminiscent of its glorious past, as pointed out by the author throughout the text. The word 火 (*huo*), fire or terms related to it appear in most of the passages describing the present condition of the lot of land and the old house belonging to the narrator's family:

路到了盡頭，眼前的景觀令人大吃一驚。熄了火。[…] 兩間木屋都不見了，只見一片廢墟。亂木橫陳。[…] 有的已成炭，有的半成炭。"爸，你的老家呢？"兒子問。[…]"這就是了。毀了。""爲什麼毀了？""有人放火了"(p.27)

At the end of the path, a scary landscape unfolded before our eyes: there had been a fire, which had destroyed both wooden houses and had transformed them in a bunch of ruins. Wooden boards were all over the place. […] Some had already become charcoal; others were on their way to turning into it. "Dad, where's your old house?" my son asked. […] "It's right here, it's been burnt up." "And why has it been burnt up?" "Because somebody set fire to it."

In this passage, fire is a clear sign of destruction, the symbol of a powerful force sweeping away not only material things, but also memories, and the possibility to pass them onto the next generation. However, the very same force, perceived as destructive by

someone, can become the allegory of a brand new start for someone else, as is the case of the newly arrived Indonesian immigrants, as we will see later in this chapter.

The visceral attachment to the land by the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia can be best described by the care and passion with which the narrator's parents seed the soil, in a symbolic act of birth-giving. The same attachment is also shown in a later paragraph of the story, where the main character and his father are connected, literally, to the soil:

> 和父親一樣，習慣赤腳在土地上，除非是走進莽林，怕踩著刺或被斷枝割傷。於是腳和土地頗有感情，常只有上學或上街 ——離開園子 ——才會穿上鞋子。踩上柏油路，很正式的走入另一個世界。**(p.35)**
>
> ***Just like my father, I used to walk barefoot, unless I entered the misty and rainy forest, scared as I was to trample upon a thorn or to cut myself with a broken branch. Therefore, feet and soil developed a rather strong connection. Usually, I would wear shoes only to go to school or to town – in other words, only when I left the garden. Stepping my feet on a paved road was the formal beginning of my trip into a new world.***

As the above passage clearly shows, the strong relationship is between the narrator (but it could also hold true talking about his father) and the limited space he calls home. The difference between home and homeland is thus blurred. As we can clearly see, no mention to China is made, nor does the author explicitly write about Malaysia as his homeland. His world, thus his home and homeland is contained in the restricted space surrounded by the equatorial wilderness, in the form of the misty and rainy forest and the urban civilization represented by the paved road. It was not only his world, but also his father's kingdom.

> 這曾經是父親的王國。**[…]** 爲了避免鋤到別人的土地惹爭議，總留下一排顆樹和別人的土地相連 **[…](p.36)**

> ***This was once my father's kingdom […] to avoid arguing with the neighbours because some of his plants had grown on their land, he used to leave a row of trees as land-limit demarcation […]***

A few paragraphs later, we realize that the attachment to "the kingdom" was partly instilled by the narrator's overprotective grandfather:

> 爲了怕他在林裏工作被蚊子咬，還未成年，就讓他抽煙，經營他微小的王國。他早就種在原子裏了，像那些老樹。**(p.37)**
>
> ***Being afraid that [my dad] would be stung by mosquitoes, while working in the forest, [my grandfather] allowed him to smoke at a very early age, and to run his own tiny kingdom. He had been planted in the garden earlier on, just like those old trees.***

It is evident in this passage, the absence of any connection to China and the distance from the world the narrator's grandparents had left behind. The narrator's father becomes, therefore, in his own way a "son of the soil", holding, at least symbolically, the status that later on, with the birth of the Malaysian federation, was given to Malay and aborigine people. The author thus points out that belonging to somewhere and growing roots in a certain place – be the place as big as a country, be it as small as a lot of land – does not depend on ethnicity.

To find a connection with China, to discover Chineseness, the author has to go back to his grandparents' migration to Southeast Asia from imperial China, a place far in both place and time from the narrator's personal experience and identity:

> 生於清末那衰老的帝國的祖父母留下的土地，及他們的格言'找土討吃，莫向人乞食'。他們原從唐山，飄搖過南中國海，在新加坡上岸，徒步走向沒落的

土邦，英殖民馬來半島富饒之地之一柔佛的心臟。**(p.36)**

My grandparents were born at the end of the Qing era in a decaying empire. With the land they had left us, an advice had come along: "find a piece of land to ensure you have something to eat and never panhandle for food."

While the only direct reference to China directly connected with the narrator and his parents is about food:

父母親上街[會買]中國進口的乾貨 **(p.35)**

When my parents went grocery shopping they used to buy dried imported goods from China.

The theme of many young ethnic Chinese leaving Malaysia in order to further their studies abroad is mentioned twice in the story. The first is an allusion to the connection still existing between the "self-exiled" student and his family/homeland:

[我]載了一個沉甸甸的小紙箱。是出國前寄放在母親那兒的私人物品。每個離家的兄弟姐妹都有這麼一個箱子寄放在母親那兒。(p.32)

[I] carried a heavy little paper box containing personal belongings, which I had sent to my mother's address before leaving the country. Each one of us siblings had this same habit to keep such a box at our mother's.

The second time the relationship to Taiwan is mentioned is when Ng explains the return to Malaysia of the narrator's brother, after pursuing university studies and obtaining his degree. It clearly shows the difference between the narrator, who chose to put down roots in Taiwan and his elder brother, who instead made the choice to go back to his birthplace, as many "overseas Chinese students" did:

有一年，大哥剛從臺灣念完土木工程學位歸來，在家待業。**(p.37)**

One year, my eldest brother went back home after obtaining his degree in civil engineering in Taiwan and was waiting for employment.

It is only in the second part of the story, when the narration almost approaches the end, that we find another essential theme to Ng Kim Chew's production, i.e. the relationship with the other. The strength of the writer lies, in my opinion, in his ability to lead the reader throughout the changes in this relationship.

The first allusion to the presence of someone else or 'the other', in a world that otherwise seems inhabited only by memories and luxuriant yet menacing vegetation, involves the auditory sense, which is only marginal in previous paragraphs and therefore, denotes a turning point within the narration:

我們慢慢走過去，不遠處雜樹林裏，突然一陣悉悉索索，匆促的腳步聲，隱約大大小小灰褐色影子一閃，向更深的密林竄去。(p.39-40)

As we slowly moved away [from the garden], we heard hurried footsteps stomping the foliage in the nearby forest and noticed a flash of indistinct brown shadows scurrying into the thicker part of the forest.

As father and son walk closer to the garden, the vision becomes clearer and 'the other' unfolds before their eyes. The solitude that lingers on the first part of the story, where very few characters are present, many of them having already passed away, and the Chinese community once inhabiting the area has left to resettle in urban areas (as is the case with the narrator's siblings) or in other countries (in the case of the narrator himself) disappears and a community, although of a different type, inhabits the last few pages of the story. The first contact between the community and 'the outsider' (i.e. the narrator) is very hostile indeed:

一個包裹著紗籠的中年馬來女人發出驚呼聲，口中大聲嚷著什麼。沒一會，不同高腳屋裏都閃出人來，有幼童，老人，也有壯漢，都是一臉驚疑，眉

眼都有灼傷的表情。幾個青年人手上都拿著粗大棒子，斧頭和鋤頭，情況變得非常危險，我突然警覺手上仍緊握著開山刀。便放下刀及小孩，攤開手，向人群中一位阿拉伯人深眼窩的白頭巾老者以馬來語說，我沒有惡意，以前在對面園子裏，幾年沒回來了，不知道這裡住了這麼多人。**(p.41)**

A middle-aged Malay woman weaving a yarn basket let out a frightened and incomprehensible cry. Not even a moment had passed, when people started dashing out of the various stilt houses.[58] Children, old people and sturdy men alike all had surprised expressions over their sunburnt faces. A few youngsters were holding thick clubs, axes and hoes and the situation was getting dangerous. I suddenly realized I was still holding tight to my machete. So I dropped it down and let go of my son's hand, showing that mine were unarmed now. There was an old man among the crowd; he was wearing a turban and had deep Arabic eyes. I told him, in Malay, that I had no ill intentions and that I used to live in the facing plot of land and hadn't come back in years, so I couldn't possibly know there were so many people living there now.

This first contact is thus characterized by diffidence and hostility, due to a visual misunderstanding (the narrator's holding of a machete), and the microcosm the author presents is an unmistakable portrait of the negative side of multiracial Malaysian society, with its different ethnic groups and the differences, difficulties and the lack of understanding that often arise among them.

With the hostile climate not having evaporated, a Malay youngster makes clear, rather straightforwardly, that the narrator has no right of possession to any piece of land:

[58] A stilt house is a dwelling normally raised on piles over the soil or a body of water. In Malay, they are known as *kelong*. It is not uncommon, in rural or offshore locations around Malaysia and Indonesia to find large groups of *kelong* joined together forming a community, or even a small village.

那又不是你們的地，是tanah Negara (國家的土地)。

(p.41)

That's not your land anyways, it belongs to the State.

我知道我談不下去了。(p.42)

I knew there was nothing else I could say.

It is interesting to note that Ng Kim Chew uses the Malay expression *tenah negara*, literally meaning state-owned land, thus stressing again the parallelism between the dialogue – or the impossibility of it – between the community and the narrator and the actual greater picture of the interethnic negotiations between the *Bumiputra* – the actual possessors of the land according the the racial and political discourse of post-independence Malaysia – and the ethnic Chinese.

It should also be noted that religion plays a central role in an officially Islamic country such as Malaysia.[59] The old man underlines this fact and associated it again to the land:

土地都是向阿拉借的。(p.43)

We all borrowed the land from Allah.

The narrator then discovers that many objects actually belonging to his family are scattered around the stilt houses and anything usable has been taken by the community that, as we discover later in the story, is not originally from peninsular Malaysia. They are in fact illegal immigrants from Indonesia. The author gives us a brief explanation about the reasons and the conditions that led them to leave their homeland and although never directly compared to the Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia, which took place long time before, Ng spurs the reader to consider whether ultimately there is any difference based on ethnicity in the migratory phenomenon.

他們來自Pulau Roti一帶，還不到一年。他說他們的

故鄉是座火山島，最近兩年又一直在冒出濃煙了，

[59] Although Islam officially regulates only the life of the *Bumiputra*, non-Muslim ethnic communities in Malaysia also have to show respect and adapt to the Islamic environment of the country.

眼看就要爆發。印尼到處都找不到工作，只好離開。反正他們世代以來都在島與島間遷移。**(p.43)**

They had arrived less than one year earlier form Roti Island. He [the old man] told me their native place was a volcanic island and in the last two years it had been sending out thick smoke and it was evident that an eruption was approaching. Everywhere in Indonesia, jobs were unavailable, so the only solution was to leave, which anyways is what they had been doing for generations, migrating from island to island.

The theme of migration brings, therefore, the Indonesian migrants closer to the narrator and the diasporic community he hails from. With a few final sentences, imbued with hope, Ng Kim Chew reconnects all the central themes to the story and, more generally speaking, to his entire production, which are, as we have seen: childhood, memory, the relationship with China/Chineseness and the relationship with 'the other':

小孩和小孩很快就玩了起來。老人自在的吸著煙,四周盡是耀目水光，我背靠牆，放鬆下來。熟悉的感覺又回來了。**(p.44)**

The children began to play, while old man smoked at ease. All around was floodlit. I leant against the wall and relaxed: a familiar feeling came back to me.

2.2 The language

Malaysian-Chineseness, which was mentioned in the previous chapter of this research paper, can be considered also the main linguistic feature of Ng Kim Chew's writings.[60] *Huo yu tu* is definitely no exception; it is actually one of the most interesting and clear examples of Ng's writing style.

[60] An exception is one of his earlier stories from the mid-nineties, which was awarded the first prize in one of many Taiwan national literary competitions: 魚骸 (*Yuhai*, or "The fishbone" in English),written in a language vaguely recalling classical Chinese, with insertions of ancient Chinese expressions. The short story

The story, from the very beginning, situates us in the peculiar space of Malaysian-Chineseness. In fact, it starts with a couplet in Malay, followed by the literal Chinese translation of it:

Kalau itu api
Kalau itu tanah
如果那是火
如果那是土 (p.23)
If that is fire
If that is soil

In other two occasions in the story, Ng uses Malay phrases, which in one case have an exact equivalent in Chinese (*tanah negara*, which is 國家的土地 in Chinese, "state-owned land" in English), while in the other have a standardized Chinese translation/transliteration (*Pulau Roti*, 羅帝島, which indicates Roti, an Indonesian island situated to the southwest of the larger island of Timor). It is interesting to note that both expressions are spoken by the old Indonesian immigrant, while the narrator's speech, although actually carried out in Malay when he communicates with the newly-arrived immigrants, is always in Chinese and no words in Malay are spoken out by him in the text.

The use of Malay words in his texts is fairly common practice for Ng Kim Chew, but a rarity among Malaysian Chinese authors. Li Yongping, for example, is a purist and tries to avoid any regionalism in his writing, let alone introducing any Malay expression. Chang Kuei-Hsin also uses a much more standardized form of Chinese, when compared to Ng Kim Chew, and even his dialogues tend to be written in a language as close as possible to written standard Mandarin Chinese.

Another linguistic feature of the story is the use, definitely more frequent than in other authors, of local variant of the Chinese language. For example, the use of 伊 (*yi*), a third-person singular animate pronoun, equivalent to 他/她(*ta*) in modern standard Chinese

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is analyzed in Chiu, Kuei-Fen, op.cit., and it is contained in Ng Kim Chew's short-story collection 烏暗暝 (*Wuan ming*), published in 1997.

appears throughout the text. This pronoun, considered archaic in both written and spoken forms of standard Mandarin Chinese, is the most common third-person personal pronoun in the Hokkien dialect. Therefore, its use gives the text a more local flavour, and I personally see it as an assertion of the author's *Malaysian-Chineseness*.

The same can be said about a colloquial sentence uttered by the narrator's mother:

莫踩到蛇 (p.39)

Be careful not to step on snakes.

The character 莫 (*mo*) is the common negation in Hokkien dialects, comparable to 不 (*bu*) or sometimes 別/不要 (*bie/bu yao*) in standard Mandarin Chinese, in which *mo* has an archaic flavour and is only used in proverbs or fixed four-character expressions (成語 *chengyu*).

As the above sentence shows, dialogues are rather vivid and colloquial expressions or grammatical forms are the norm, rather than the exception as we can see in the following examples:

"爸爸你幹嘛？"

"趕蚊子。" (p.27)

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"I'm keeping the mosquitoes away."

In the question, the use of 幹嘛 (*ganma*) gives the text a highly familiar tone, as the more literary/standard form would be 做甚麼 (*zuo shenme*), and vividness is also denoted by the lack of the first-person personal pronoun 我 (*wo*), in the answer.

A few pages later, in another sentence uttered this time by the narrator's mother, we find again the same colloquial flavour. It is due to a grammatical structure typical of the Hokkien dialects, which has transferred to spoken Mandarin Chinese in its Taiwanese and Southeast Asian (Malaysia and Singapore) varieties:

"有遇到山豬嗎？"伊問說。 (p.31)

"Have you met any wild boar?" she asked.

According to standard Mandarin grammar, the speaker would not make use of the verb 有 (*you*), used as a marker for the past tense, in the above utterance. A speaker of standard Mandarin would replace 有 with the particle 了(*le*), also a marker of a past action, and put it after the verb. Therefore, the same question uttered in standard Mandarin Chinese would be: "遇到了山豬嗎？" (*Yudao le shanzhu ma?*)[61]

On a semantic level, words related to the equatorial vegetation realm abound. Names of plants and trees native to Southeast Asia appear throughout the text: 膠林，雨林，芒果樹，榴蓮樹 (*jiaolin* – rubber forest, *yulin* – rainy forest, *mangguo shu* – mango tree, *liulian shu* – durian tree).

It is the abundance of such space-specific nouns that gives the text a very spatial-specific flavour and constitutes the Malaysian-Chineseness of Ng Kim Chew's literary language. It is thus, thanks to/because of his realistic language that he has not crossed the line from 華文 (*huawen*) to 中文 (*zhongwen*), as previously stated.

Another interesting feature of Ng Kim Chew's language is his "direct dialogue" with his readership, which he supposes as predominantly Taiwanese. It denotes that, while writing, Ng does keep in mind that it does indeed exist a certain amount of consumption of his production in Taiwan. A few times, he introduces explanatory notes, within the text and in brackets, to clarify Malaysia-specific issues, as on page 26:

> **當年地價最好的時候，一百千馬幣（百萬台幣）。**
> **(p.26)**
> **That year the price of land was at its lowest, one hundred thousand *ringgit* (one million Taiwanese dollars).**

In the same sentence, it is also interesting to note the influence of the English language when counting the Malaysian monetary unit (one hundred thousand should be 十萬 *shiwan*, literally 'ten ten thousand' in standard Mandarin Chinese).

[61] Features related to the Hokkien dialect, or its official standard recognized by the Republic of China (Taiwan), and discussed here can be found in Ministry of Education, ed., *Elementary Taiwanese For Foreginers*, Taipei: Kaito Publishing, 2005

V. CONCLUSION

I started this paper by saying it was intended as an introduction to the situation of Contemporary Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan, through the study of Ng Kim Chew, one of the main representatives of this group of writers and a brief analysis of one of his short stories.

In the introductory chapter of this research project, I also stated that I aimed at solving what I considered a contradiction, i.e. how the feeling of Chineseness – closely connected to a very geospatial specific China (the ancestral homeland, thus far away in time and space) – combines with Ng's estrangement from it and his subsequent attachment to his how native place, the rubber forest of peninsular Malaysia. In my opinion, and as I already mentioned in various occasions across the dissertation, there is no Chineseness involved in Ng Kim Chew's literary production. Instead what we can talk about is *Malaysian-Chineseness*, an identity shaped on Chinese values and traditions, but not geographically tied to the Chinese mainland.

Chineseness is therefore, the substratum or the fertile soil on which to plant the seed of a new identity, closely related to and affected by the very peculiar situation Ng Kim Chew grew up in. The equatorial landscape, interethnic relations, distance from the centre of Chinese culture and the will to keep it alive in a rather hostile environment, all contributed to the making of this new identity: *Malaysian-Chineseness*, an identity not

purely Malaysian, yet not fully Chinese either, and ironically being able, if allowed by the political discourse of both the Greater China region and Malaysia, to occupy a central role in both societies.

It was also noted how memories play a central role in the literary production of these Taiwan-based diasporic writers. Due to time constraints and the limited length of this paper, the analysis only focused on one short story by Ng Kim Chew. However, I consider the chosen story to be exemplary of the themes and features of his entire literary production, in which memory is a pivotal element – sometimes turning into an obsession, as seen from the excerpts included in this paper.

I am aware that this study is but a presentation and a general introduction to a still unexplored field of studies. Therefore, it is by no means exhaustive, and it was never developed keeping exhaustiveness in mind, but on the contrary, it was conceived as the first step to a broader research project.

With this paper, I would like to draw attention on the importance of opening paths leading to other literary traditions and to the importance of continuing – or beginning a tradition in – the studies on East and Southeast Asian cultures in the field of the humanities, too often considered unprofitable.

There is still so much unexplored literature from the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, that it is impossible to give an accurate account of it in such a brief paper, and not even in a doctoral dissertation. My hope is that, in the future, more graduate students and scholars in Spanish institutions will carry out research in the field within which this work situates.

During the writing of this paper, bibliographical research carried out thanks to the support of friends in Italy, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh (Malaysia), at the University of Toronto and at the Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada), who helped me locate books and scholarly articles unavailable in Spain, have raised other questions and research interrogatives, which I have decided not to introduce in this paper for congruity's sake. Nevertheless, such ideas could be the focus of future research projects.

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